終末なにしてますか？忙しいですか？救ってもらっていいですか？

枯野瑛
Akira Kareno

Illustration ue

Do you have what THE END? Are you busy? Shall you save XXX?

角川スニーカー文庫

Do you have what THE END?
Are you busy?
Shall you save XXX?
枯野 瑛
Akira Kareno
illustration
ue
終末なにしてますか？
忙しいですか？
救ってもらっていいですか？

「うん。夢も叶ったし、
いい思い出もできたし、
思い残すことはもうないかな」
わたしが発生した時のこと？
うん、ちょっとだけ覚えてる。
暗い森の中でひとり、わんわん泣いてた。
寂しかったのもあるけど、どうしてか、
ものすごく悲しかったから。
あのまま先輩たちが見つけてくれなかったら、たぶん、氷たまりになるまで泣き続けてたと思う。……いや、わたしたちの体質ってけっこうデタラメだし、半分本気の話で。
今？　今はもう大丈夫。寂しい悲しいでぴーぴー泣いてられるほど、穏やかな生活じゃないもの。
……って、なによ。その優しい目。
子供扱いされてるみたいで、むかつく。

クトリ・ノタ・セニオリス

「別に。お礼を言われるようなことはしてない」
ん、と……空をみて、ぼーっとしてた。
それが、私のいちばん古い記憶。
ちょっと風の強い日で、雲もあんまり出てなかった。吸いこまれそうな空っていうか、うん、そんな感じ。
このまま立ってたら、風にとけて消えちゃいそうだなとか。それならそれでいいとか。そんなこと考えながら、ずっと立ってた。
……この世界は、こわれかけだって。
大切なものはぜんぶ遠い昔に壊れてしまったって。残るものは全部無価値だって。
理由はわからないけど、生まれたての私は、そんなことばかり考えてた。
あれは、きっと。
いま貴方が抱いているのと、同じ気持ち。

ネフレン・ルク・インサニア

「こんなズタボロの体でやりあったとか、
ガチ命がけじゃないっすか。
かなり気持ち悪いレベルっすよ？」
はあ。
あたしが発生した時のことっすか。
質問を質問で返すのもなんすけど、
どうしてそんなこと聞くんすかね？
人生は、生まれた時に始まるものっすよ。
そして、あたしらの人生は、あたしらのものっす。
前世的なモノから何か引きずって生まれるとかそーゆーのは、いまここにある自分たちの毎日に申し訳がないってなもんっすよ。
そんなわけっすから、技官にはこれまで通り、目の前のあたしらだけを見て愛情を注いでいただけると幸いっす。
……いや、いまの、照れてみせるとこっすよ？　真顔で頷くとこじゃないっすよ？

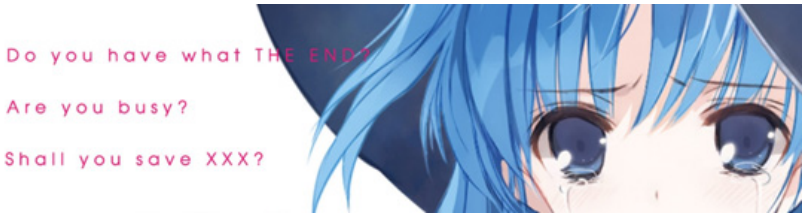
アイセア・マイゼ・ヴァルガリス

「現代とか古代とか、関係ない。
おいしいものが食べられる時代は、
全部いい時代よ」
ナイグラート

What are you doing at the end? Are you busy? Can you save me?

Volume 1

Written by Akira Kareno
Illustrated by ue



Translated by fgilan
EPUB by Nephery

What are you
doing at the end?
Are you busy?
Can you save me?

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『Before This World Ends — A』

-promise/result-

The night before the final battle.

At least spend these final moments with the people you want to meet one last time. The group of heroes gathered to defeat Elq Harksten, a "Visitor" officially recognized as an enemy of the Church of Holy Light, was temporarily released for that reason.

"... so why did you come back here?" asked the Daughter, a look of astonishment on her face.

"I just told you, didn't I? Tomorrow's the final battle. There's no guarantee that we'll be able to come home safely, so they said to spend our last night with the people important to us–".

"That's exactly what's wrong with this!" the Daughter exclaimed, sharply cutting off the Father's words. Scurrying about the kitchen of a small public orphanage, she seemed very angry for some reason. "No

matter how you think about it, when they said ‘important people’ they really meant a wife or girlfriend or something of that sort!”

“Well, I think a few people did end up doing that..”

Including the current Regal Brave, the group of heroes consisted of seven people in total. Among these, two were married and two were in a relationship — well, one of those two said he had so many lovers he didn’t know which one to spend the night with, so he can be treated as an exception.

“Anyway, I’m here now, and where those people choose to go has nothing to do with me.”

A delicious smell wafted by, followed by the loud rumbling of an empty stomach. Fortunately, the Daughter, concentrating hard on stirring the contents of the stew pot, didn’t seem to hear.

“So you don’t have any girl you want to spend your last night with, Father?”

Although the girl called him father, the young man was not her true biological father. He just happened to be the oldest of the ones raised at this orphanage; the manager of the place, who maybe should have been their father figure, was a little too old for the title, so the nickname stuck.

“There’s no way I’d have that kind of free time,” Father replied. “Ever since I qualified to become a Quasi Brave, everyday has been never-ending training, studying, fighting, and more fighting.”

“Hmm?”

Judging by her half-hearted response, the Daughter obviously did not believe his excuses. Well, that’s understandable. Quasi Braves, second in strength only to the Church appointed Regal Brave, humanity’s greatest warrior, have enormous popularity

with the public. Going into any town and revealing one's identity as a Brave will instantly draw a surrounding of girls squealing in high pitched voices, and attending a congress sponsored party will have you randomly introduced to daughters from noble families.

However, attracting a girl with your shiny title of Quasi Brave and having that girl be someone you actually like in return are completely separate issues. No matter what girl approached him or what tricks they tried, the young soldier always just sort of pushed them away. Of course, he was aware that other guys would consider this an unfortunate waste.

"When I saw you before, there seemed to be some pretty nice girls working with you though.."

"No idea who you're talking about, but comrades are just comrades you know?"

“The fact that you’re saying that seriously and not just being clueless kinda makes me want to kill you.”

“Geez, you can be really mean sometimes.”

“Hmm… just like someone I know…” retorted the Daughter, right as the stew finished cooking.

“Are the little kids already in bed?”

“Of course. What time do you think it is?”

“Then what about that good-for-nothing master?” the Father inquired, referring to the old man that manages the orphanage. No one knows anything about his past before he came to the orphanage, but somewhere and somehow he acquired extraordinary swordsmanship skills. To the young man, he was the strongest man and best sword teacher in the world, but the complete opposite of a good exemplar with

regard to everything else.

“He said he had some business in the Capital and went off. Lately whenever I think he’s come home, he goes right out the door again,” the Daughter replied with a sigh. “I wish he would just settle down here for a while.”

“So it’s just been you and the kids keeping watch over this place?”

“Mhm. What, did you all of a sudden decide to worry about us?”

“Ah… well…”

The Daughter laughed at the young man’s loss of words. “Just kidding. Guards from town sometimes come here on patrol, and lately Ted has been coming to help out pretty often.”

The Father reacted immediately at the mention of that name. “I’m grateful for the

guards keeping watch, but kick Ted out. I don't want him near you."

"Look at you, getting all serious. Do you really dislike him that much?"

It's not that the young man *hated* Ted, but as a "Father" he thought he had the right and the obligation to be angry in situations like these.

"The food's ready, help yourself," the Daughter declared as she took off her apron and carried the big stew pot over to the table.

"Ah, finally! Even before I arrived here I was starving."

"Well, all I did was warm up some leftovers since it's so late," the Daughter said with a straight face. However, the young man could see through her attempt to hide her embarrassment; he knew that food in this orphanage was not so plentiful

that a whole pot of stew would be left over from dinner.

He decided to pretend he didn't notice, replying with a simple "thanks".

"You don't need to thank me for something like this," the Daughter said proudly. She sat down across the table with a grin, chin resting in her hands, and watched the young man eat.

Let's be honest here, the Father thought to himself. *Even if I had a girlfriend, I probably would have spent this night here at the orphanage anyway. Five years ago when I was still a little boy, I picked up a sword for the first time in order to protect this place. During those five years, I struggled through the hell that training was, even though I had no special talent, because I knew that one day I would be able to return here.*

Tomorrow, we go to fight the Visitors, the enemies of all the humans living upon this land.

When you say it like that, it sounds like a grand adventure with a heroic cause. But in the end, we will do the same thing that we've always done. For the things we want to protect. For the places we want to return home to. We take up our swords, fight, and survive.

"But still, at least in times like these, don't you think you could say something a little considerate for once?" the Daughter complained.

The Father, slightly confused, listened as he broke up a potato into bite-sized pieces. "Something considerate? Like what?"

"'After this war ends, I'll get married!' Something like that."

"Uhh.. those words have never lead to anything good."

The Father recalled a time when he, a young boy, looked up to and idolized the Regal Braves. He would often read fiction

that told of their adventures, and, if he remembered correctly, whenever someone said a line similar to what the Daughter just suggested, the character would soon after meet an untimely death.

Given that the young man did not particularly want to die, he did not want to say anything that would foreshadow his own death.

“I know, I know. The little kids read the books you left behind, and I’ve memorized the storylines after helping them so many times.”

“If you understood that and still told me to say those words, then I think you’re the bad person here…” the Father pointed out while carrying a spoonful of stew to his mouth. The delicious flavor, overflowing with spices, brought back fond memories. Made specially to suit the tastes of hungry children, this stew would not be found at

any high-class restaurant in the Capital.

"Well, I get that, but still... I feel something's not right." The Daughter started lightly tapping her fingernails on the table. "Tonight, you and the other soldiers were told to not leave any regrets behind. Isn't that the same as telling you to be ready to die at any moment? That doesn't seem right to me... I don't know anything about war, but I think that those who aren't ready to die at all would be more likely to survive, because they tell themselves that they must return home no matter what."

The Daughter paused for a moment, a grave look on her face, then continued. "In the books you used to read, those types of characters were killed off first because it makes for a more dramatic and exciting story. Of course it's more sad when a character dies if you really wanted to see them return home and reunite with their

loved ones. But in real life it doesn't work that way."

The Father could see her fingers starting to shake ever so slightly. She was a strong girl, never letting any hint of fear or anxiety show on the outside. No matter how tough things got, a true complaint never escaped her lips.

"So when you go to fight tomorrow, don't jinx yourself by having such a pessimistic mindset. You need something more certain to cling on to, a clear reason why you need to return home. If you don't tell me one right now, I don't think I'll have the strength to send you off with a smile tomorrow morning."

The young man knew what she was trying to say. He wanted to do something to comfort her, but still, he couldn't just suddenly announce his wedding plans. First of all, he would actually need a

partner to marry, and an important decision like marriage isn't something you just decide on the spot. On the other hand, something silly like "I'll think of a good name while I'm away, so have a baby ready when I get back" would definitely earn him a hard slap.

After some careful thought, he replied: "Butter cake."

"Huh?"

"The one you bake is pretty good. Make an especially big one on my next birthday, will you?"

"You're going to live through the battle and come home.. for a butter cake?"

"Something wrong?"

"Ahh.. I was hoping for something more serious, but..." The Daughter scratched her face a little, then replied, "Well I guess that

works. In return, you'll have to eat so much cake that you get heartburn." She managed to put on a smile, although it showed a hint of the dark turmoil beneath.

"Of course. Leave it to me." The young man, still munching on the stew, assured the Daughter.

The night wore on, with each passing minute bringing the morning of the final battle closer.

Within a year from that night, humanity went extinct.

Naturally, the young Quasi Brave couldn't keep his promise.

『In This Twilight World』

-broken chronograph-

I The Black Cat and the Ashen Girl

A black cat was running. Not only was it running, it was running at an unbelievably fast speed. It winded through the narrowest alleys, jumped over the highest walls, and hopped gracefully between the tops of roadside stalls.

This area, known as the Market Medlei, was originally set up to host a special marketplace held once a month. Over time, due to a series of unplanned constructions and building expansions, it transformed into an enormous labyrinth, daunting enough to distress any newcomers walking through.

Through this gargantuan maze, the black cat sprinted at full speed. Why was the cat running, you ask? It was attempting to escape. Escape from what, you ask? His

pursuer, of course.

“Waaaait uppp!!” the pursuer cried, trying desperately to keep up with the speedy little demon. The young girl just barely squeezed her way through the narrowest alleys, clumsily rolled over the highest walls, and fell down loudly from the tops of roadside stalls (while getting yelled at by the shop owners). Despite the struggle, she kept her blue eyes focused straight ahead, intent on catching the black cat.

The girl wore a rather plain outfit: a gray hat, worn low so as to almost cover her eyes, and a coat of the same color. Judging by that combination, she probably wanted to stand out as little as possible, but her screaming at the cat and running like a madman undid whatever effect her clothing choices had.

“I said... wait... up....” The hem of her coat

flapping up and down, the girl continued her pursuit, kicking up dust clouds and scattering empty paint cans across the floor as she went. Dashing through the streets at such a terrifying speed, the girl drew stares from various people: an Orc selling miscellaneous goods, the scaly Reptrace owner of a carpet shop, a group of wolf-like Lucantrobos passing by.

Then, suddenly, the black cat stopped cold in its tracks.

“Gotcha!” The girl took a big leap forward, not wanting to miss this unexpected opportunity. As she drew closer, almost within reach, the black cat turned around, revealing a shining silver object next to its mouth. The girl spread out her arms and embraced her long sought after quarry.

Before she got a chance to celebrate, however, an unnatural floating sensation

engulfed her entire body. Then, she noticed: there was nothing under her feet.

"Eh?"

Her view of Market Medlei whirled and spun in a confused blur of color. The girl realized a few moments too late that, blinded by the sight of her prey so close, she failed to notice that the path she was running along had exited onto the roof of an apartment complex.

"Ah..."

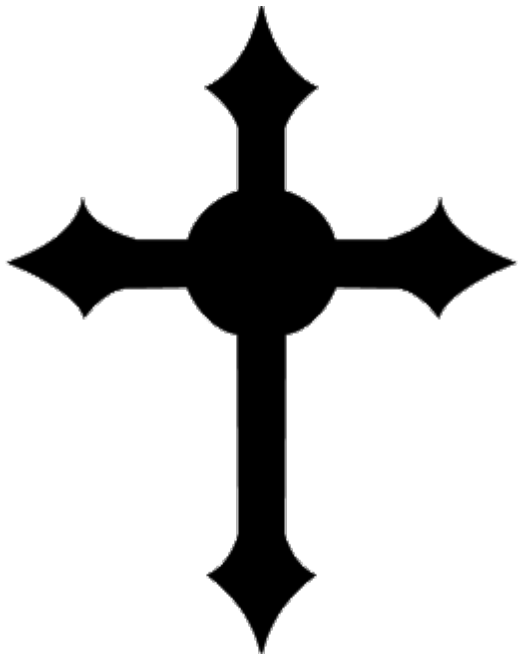
The great blue sky, dotted with a few white clouds, filled her field of vision. Still hugging the black cat, the young girl flew through the air. Directly below, she saw the Western 7th Briki Shopping District, whose stalls specialized mostly in hard metal pots and very sharp kitchen knives. Adjusting for the height of the buildings, she estimated about a four story distance until touchdown.

The girl gathered her strength and managed to produce a faint glow surrounding her body. Those with the ability to see Spell Veins would have seen the Venom inside her body desperately trying to ignite. But no matter what she planned to do with that Venom, it was already too late.

'Venom' is a flame like substance. A small spark of it can't accomplish much, but a blazing inferno can hold tremendous power. To get a flame up to that level, though, takes a hefty amount of time and energy. In other words, Venom doesn't have much use for responding to sudden, on the fly situations like the girl's.

The two bodies, one human and one cat, continued their descent. The faint light radiating from the girl futilely danced about in the air before disappearing. She didn't even have time to scream. The stone pavement, which had seemed so far away a

moment ago, grew closer at an alarming rate. She inadvertently tightened her grip on the cat, which let out a shriek. Helpless against the pull of gravity, the girl closed her eyes and braced for impact.



A girl fell out of the sky. Judging from her figure, she was probably in her early teens, and also falling pretty fast. At that rate, she would soon have a violent collision with the stone covered streets, leaving a gruesome scene unfit for a

peaceful early afternoon.

That sight was the first thing that flew into Willem's view when he casually tilted his head upward. Before his brain got a chance to fully process the image, his legs had already set into motion, as if acting all by themselves. He sprinted directly under the girl's trajectory and spread out his arms, ready for the catch.

Willem soon found out, however, that he had severely underestimated the momentum with which the girl fell. His useless arms unable to withstand the tremendous force of the impact, Willem collapsed underneath the girl's body, letting out a shriek similar a crushed frog's.

"Ouch..." he groaned with what little air he could gather.

"S-Sorry!!"

The girl, who finally seemed to have

grasped the situation, jumped up and started to panic.

“Are you hurt!? Are you alive!? Are any organs crushed!? A–”

The flustered girl managed to completely forget about the black cat still sitting in her arms, who took this opportunity to make a run for it. The girl reflexively shot out her hand, but by then all she could grab was air; the cat only needed a moment’s delay to disappear into the bustling crowd surrounding them.

A scream erupted from the girl’ mouth, half out of frustration from losing the animal that started the whole mess, and half out of surprise when she realized what happened to her appearance. Somewhere along the way, either during her madman dash or her freefall, the hat she had been wearing low over her eyes fell off. Her sky blue hair, previously hidden, flowed down

past her shoulders.

Hey, look at her.

She heard whispers from all around; the pedestrians and shopkeepers of the Western 7th Briki Shopping District all paused their business to stare at the girl's face and hair.

In this group of floating islands, collectively known as Regul Aire, live various races, all distantly related to the Visitors. Of course, with this variety of races comes a variety of appearances. Some have horns sticking out of their heads, some have fangs protruding from their mouths, some have scales covering their entire body, and some have faces that look like a random mish-mash of different wild animals'.

Within that assortment, very few races have no horns, fangs, scales, or other beast-like parts at all, but they do still exist. Those

races without any special feature, or ‘mark’, from which their identity can be easily discerned, are commonly known as ‘markless’.

Why is she here?

Damn, this’ll bring me bad luck.

Generally, the ‘markless’ are shunned by the other races. According to an old legend, the race known as humans, or Emnetwyte, wreaked havoc upon the vast land below and drove all the other races up into the sky. Since the Emnetwyte closely resembled the markless races, and it only makes sense that those who look similar must act similar, the markless were branded as sinister and impure. While persecutions due to race rarely happened, being publicly exposed as a markless naturally made the girl feel ashamed.

There was also another thing, completely out of the girl’s control, which

unfortunately made the situation even worse for her. The previous mayor of this town, a perfect example of a corrupt politician, accepted bribes, hired assassins to eliminate political opponents, and in general just brought every aspect of the town under his strict control. Eventually, the Central Congress banished him from the island and everyone lived happily ever after.... But that mayor just so happened to be an Imp. Imps, a subset of Ogres, used to hide amongst the Emnetwyte and lure them into depravity. As a result, they developed an appearance very similar to humans and the other markless races. Now whenever the people of this town see a markless, they can't help but remember their anger and hatred towards the previous mayor.

While no one outright verbally or physically attacked her, the girl felt the judging looks of the townspeople piercing like thorns into her face.

“A-Alright, I’ll go away soon, so don’t worry…”

The girl stood up and attempted to flee from the stares, but found that she couldn’t move an inch. Willem, still lying on the ground, had latched onto the girl’s wrist.

“You forgot something.” He held out his other hand and dropped a small brooch into the girl’s palm.

“Ah….”

“That black cat dropped it. You were chasing after this, weren’t you?”

The girl slowly nodded. “Th-thanks.” Still slightly bewildered at the whole situation, she carefully wrapped the brooch in both hands and accepted it.

“You new to this area?”

The girl nodded again.

“I see… well then I guess it can’t be helped,” Willem said with a sigh. He quickly stood up, took off his cloak, and put it over the girl’s head, leaving her no time to object. His hood now gone, Willem’s own appearance was revealed to the surrounding townspeople. Again, a wave of commotion rippled through the crowd, but this time the stares were directed at Willem.

“Eh….” The girl let out a surprised gasp.

While Willem could not look at his own face, he obviously knew very well what he looked like. So he understood what the crowd of pedestrians and the girl standing dumbfounded in front of him had just seen. Disheveled black hair. No horns. No Fangs. No scales.

“Let’s go.”

He grabbed the girl’s hand and set out down the road with long strides. The girl,

wildly confused, followed after him in a half run. They quickly left the streets and found a nearby hat shop, where Willem bought something to cover the girl's head with.

"That should be good enough."

Although it might have been a few sizes too large, the hat looked surprisingly good on her. Willem gave a nod of satisfaction and took back his cloak.

"Umm... what is this...?" the girl asked timidly, finally managing to gather her wits.

"So other people can't tell you're a markless, of course."

While the markless, like Willem and the young girl, were generally shunned by the public, they weren't exactly hated. As long as you avoided doing anything too conspicuous, people usually left you alone.

Nevertheless, it was always better to go undetected.

“I don’t know which Floating Island you came from, but this place isn’t too friendly to markless. Do whatever you need to do quickly and get out of here. The harbor’s over that way–” Willem said, pointing across the road. “If you don’t feel safe, I can lead the way.”

“Ah... no... it’s not that...” the girl mumbled.

Willem had a hard time reading the girl’s expression. In addition to the sizable height difference, the oversized hat covering her face, which made for a great disguise, somewhat obstructed their communication abilities.

“Are you... a markless?”

“That’s right... you saw my face a couple minutes ago,” Willem confirmed, giving a

slight nod underneath his hood.

“Why are you here then? This island is the most hostile to markless in all of southwestern Regul Aire, isn’t it?”

“You can get used to living anywhere, I guess. It’s true that various inconveniences pop up often, but if you get used to it, this place can be pretty comfy,” he replied. “If you knew about that, why’d you come here?”

“Well… that’s because…”

The girl clearly didn’t feel like answering. Willem almost felt sorry for asking the question. He sighed and starting walking, gesturing for the girl to follow. She didn’t budge.

“Now what? Don’t want to get left behind, do you?”

“U-Umm… thanks a lot… for everything,”

the girl said in a frantic voice, her face half hidden underneath that giant hat. “And for any trouble that I caused… sorry. Also… um… I’m in no position to be saying this… but… ah…”

Willem scratched his head. “Somewhere you want to go? What is it?” The girl’s expression suddenly brightened at those words — probably. He could only see the lower half of her face, so he couldn’t really tell.

As the girl had discovered earlier, the roads around Market Medlei are a bit hard to navigate. Even if you can see exactly where you want to go, you may very well end up lost after a series of unforeseen detours.

The pair stood on top of Garakuta Tower, the highest point on the island, after a rather long and eventful journey through the maze of streets. Despite Willem being a

local, they ended up having to ask one of the public golems, automated guards set up in the streets by the government, for directions. Junctions that Willem remembered having three roads ended up diverging into five different paths. They accidentally stumbled upon a Frogger taking a bath, got chased around by a rampaging cow, successfully escaped from said cow only to fall into a chicken coop, and ran for their lives while profusely apologizing to the angry Ballman owner of those chickens.

In short, getting anywhere in this town is a struggle. On the bright side, Willem noticed that the girl loosened up a bit during their adventures through the streets. She would laugh and make playful comments after each disastrous incident or narrow escape. Willem couldn't tell if that was her true personality or if she was just affected by the ridiculousness of their various predicaments, but either way he

preferred it to the extreme reticence from before.

The girl leaned over the flimsy railing at the edge of the tower and let out a sigh of admiration. When viewed from this height, the bustling town below looked like a beautiful, minutely detailed painting. The winding complex of roads stretching across the canvas seemed to expand freely on its own, as if it were alive and not laid out by construction workers years ago.

Raising her line of sight a little brought the harbor into view. Situated at the outermost edge of the island, it acted as an entranceway, providing the necessary facilities for airships to land and take off. Even beyond the metal covered harbor lay the vast blue sky, spreading in all directions as far as the girl could see.

This sky, where over a hundred giant slabs of rock, called “Floating Islands”,

wander in the wind, provides the only sanctuary where people can live. The land where life originated now sits far below, forevermore out of reach.

“Something wrong?” the girl asked, turning around to look at Willem.

“Oh nothing, just admiring the view.” He shook his head and replied with his usual warm smile.

The girl laughed softly, then, after confirming no one else was around, took off her hat. Her hair, which shared the same blue as the sky surrounding them, broke free, as if flowing in the wind.

“Is this why you wanted to come here? For the view?”

“Yes. I’ve seen islands from places higher up or farther away than this before, but I’ve never gotten a chance to look down upon a city from right in the middle of it until

now."

She must live on an island near the border, Willem thought.

"I thought it would be nice to try it once." The girl paused for a moment, returning her gaze to that endless blue sky, then continued, "Hmm... my dream's come true, and I've made good memories. I don't think I have any more regrets to leave behind."

She says some pretty ominous things...

"Thanks for today. I mean it," the girl went on. "I got to see a lot of wonderful things, all because of you."

"I think that's a bit of an exaggeration." Willem scratched his head. To him, the day's events felt a bit like finding a strange kitten by the side of the road and taking it for a walk. He just happened to have some free time, so he did something different for

a change. It felt a little awkward to be thanked just for that. “So… is that your escort?”

“Huh?”

Willem nodded in the direction behind the girl. She turned around and let out a little yelp, her face a mixture of surprise and confusion. There stood a large-framed, menacing Reptrace, until now unnoticed by the girl.

Compared to other races, the scale covered Reptrace are known to have a large variety of body types. While the average Reptrace might be about the same size as most other races, occasionally there’ll be ones that only grow to the size of a small child, and on the other end of the spectrum there’ll be ones so giant it’s almost comical.

The Reptrace standing before them obviously belonged to the latter group. Just

standing there, wrapped in a military uniform, he gave off an intense air of intimidation.

"– I guess so. I had a good time… it was almost like a dream. But I have to wake up now," the girl said in a bittersweet tone. She turned around and, before running to the Reptrace's side, said one last thing to Willem: "There's just one more thing I want to ask of you… please forget about me."

What? Willem stood there, unable to find the right words to respond with. He knew that the girl obviously had some special circumstances. But from what he could gather, those circumstances didn't particularly seem to involve any kind of suffering. In that case, there was no need for Willem to get involved. If the kitten's original owner appears, there's no more need to accompany it on its walk.

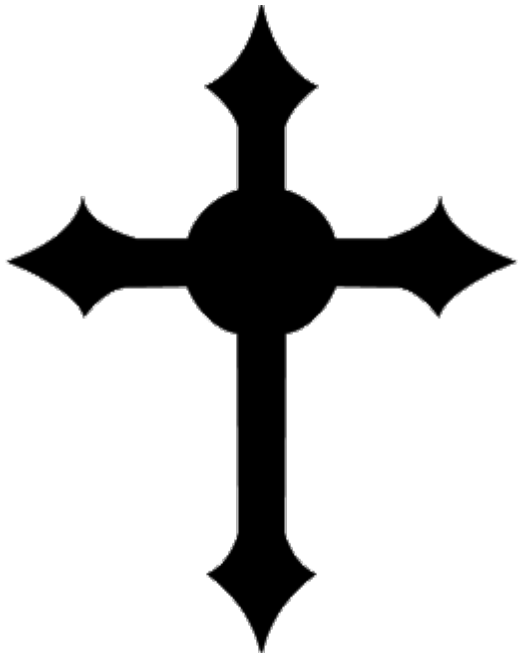
The young girl turned around one last time and lowered her head in a gesture of thanks, then disappeared below alongside the Reptrace.

“When they walk side by side… the height difference really stands out,” muttered Willem as he watched them go.

Ringing far away in the harbor, the chimes of a carillon signaled the start of the evening hours.

“Hmph… already this late, huh?”

Pretty soon, he had an appointment with someone. Willem gazed one last time at the picturesque streets below and the encompassing blue sky, then set out for the bustling town once again.



Five hundred and twenty six years have passed since the Emnetwyte went extinct. No reliable records of what occurred upon that land remain. History books contain various accounts, all claiming to be true, but no one knows for sure whether any of them contain even an iota of truth; they could all just be the wild speculation of historians not even alive during the events that unfolded. However, there are a few points consistent across many books.

First of all, the Emnetwyte, or humans, led rough lives. For many years they prospered, growing wildly in number and spreading across the land. But eventually that would be their downfall, as their wide range left them exposed to attacks from other races. They faced constant threats from the Monstrous, a collective name for various dangerous wild creatures. The Demons and their Devil King tried to lure the humans down the path of corruption. Skirmishes with the Orcs and Elves often erupted out of territory disputes. Threats came from within too: groups of humans became cursed and transformed into Ogres, who then turned on their old kin. Very rarely, humans also faced attacks from their strongest enemies, the Visitors.

On top of all that, the Emnetwyte were one of the weakest races. They had no scales, fangs, claws, or wings, and they couldn't wield powerful magic. Even their ability to breed quickly, one of their

stronger points, paled in comparison to the Orcs'. Despite this, humans still ruled over much of the land somehow.

According to one theory, a large part of their military strength came from a group of volunteer soldiers called the Adventurers and the Alliance, an organization that coordinated and supported the Adventurers' activities. They improved their group battle efficiency by dividing soldiers into different Classes and labeled various Talents to better manage training. They even managed to seal magical abilities, extremely rare amongst humans, into special charms called Talismans for mass replication. With these various methods of improvement, the Adventurers became a formidable fighting force compared to other regular humans.

A different theory proposes the existence of another group of soldiers called the Braves, separate from the Adventurers.

These Braves supposedly turned the karma and fate residing in their souls into enormous, almost limitless power. The only problem was that only a very select few ‘chosen’ ones could become Braves.

Yet another theory supposes that the Emnetwyte relied on a special type of sword called a Kaliyon. These weapons contained dozens of Talismans, whose various powers caused a complex mutual interference effect, resulting in unparalleled destructive capabilities.

Of course, all of these theories sound completely absurd, and you would be hard pressed to find someone who actually believed any of them. However, the fact remains that the untalented Emnetwyte had some kind of method to defeat the strong enemies they faced. Taking this into consideration, at least a few truths might be mixed into the mess of theories floating around.

Five hundred and twenty seven years ago, in the royal castle of the Holy Empire, the central point of the humans' territory, *they* appeared. Regarding what *they* were, or rather what they *are*, the history books again spout various theories. For example, *they* were the materialization of a curse originating among humans. Or that a secret weapon of mass destruction under development went wild. Or that, for some reason, an entranceway to hell opened up and its contents spilled out into the world. Or that a self purification mechanism, which lay dormant at the bottom of the abyss since the creation of the world, suddenly awoke.

After *their* appearance, many people threw out their own wild ideas, half in jest, but few worked to actually determine which theories had any validity. In their mind, the world was about to end, and no theory would change that. Even if the 'a lone tomato in a field of potatoes couldn't

bear the loneliness and underwent super evolution' theory proved to be correct, it wouldn't have any effect on their few remaining days.

All that mattered was that *they* were invaders. *They* were murderers. *They* symbolized the very essence of irrationality and injustice. Taking the form of seventeen different species of beasts, they began to devour the world at a frightening speed. The Emnetwyte could do nothing to resist against this new menace. In just a few days, two whole countries disappeared from the map. By the next week, five countries, four islands, and two oceans ceased to exist. After another week, a map no longer held any meaning. It is said that not even a year passed between *their* appearance and the extinction of humans.

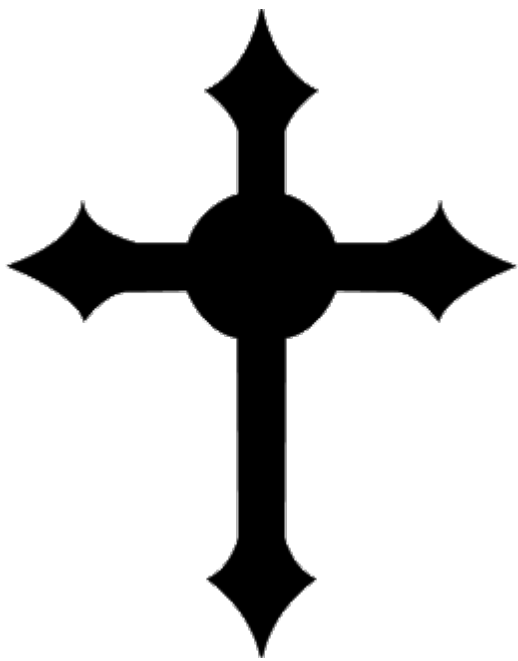
The beasts did not slow down after destroying the Emnetwyte. The Elves

fought to protect their vast forests, and died. The Moleians fought to protect their sacred mountains, and died. The Dragons fought to protect their dignity as the supreme living beings of the land, and died.

Everything on the surface of the earth simply disappeared, as if in some cruel joke. Soon, the races still living realized: there was no future for them there. If they wished to live, they would have to escape to a far away land. To a place where the savage fangs of the beasts would no longer reach them. To the sky.

2 The Markless Man

What am I? Willem often asked himself this question, but the answer was simple: a human in a place where humans shouldn't be. His very existence defied logic. With no way to return home, he wandered, forever a lost child.



When the sun begins to set, the main

streets of town become lively and colorful, illuminated by crystal lamps hanging off the walls. A light purple smoke drifted about, stirred around by various people coming and going. A Borgle raised his voice to draw in customers. A feline Ayrantrobos woman, managing her store, took a puff of her cigarette. A group of young Orcs strolled through the streets while exploding in laughter.

The side alley where Willem sat was quiet in comparison. Although just a single building stood between the two streets, almost no trace of the hustle and bustle out there could be detected.

He shelled out 32,000 Bradals, putting his remaining debt at about 150,000. “Give me about half a year, Grick.” Willem faced his old friend and put on the best smile he could manage. “I’ll have the money by then.”

The pair sat in a cheap diner. Willem wore an old, battered coat but had his hood down, revealing his markless face.

“....”

The man named Grick, an average sized Borgle, counted the money Willem handed over with an unsatisfied expression. Inside the envelope was a large stack of small Bradal bills, which made the counting process unnecessarily long.

An awkward silence followed.

“Ahh... oh! That’s right... how are Anaala and the others doing?”

“Anaala? Not too well. Got gobbled up by a ‘The 3rd’ last month,” Grick answered curtly, never taking his eyes off the money. “By the way, Gulgura also died. You know how the 47th Floating Island sank last summer? Yeah, he got caught up in that... now he’s just a little stain on the ground

below."

"Ah... sorry... shouldn't have asked." Willem's shoulders sagged at the sad news.

Grick, not seeming to care much, just laughed. "Don't worry about it. We're all salvagers. From the moment we first set foot on that ground, we're already prepared to die... or to let others die if the need arises. Besides, those two lived a pretty long life. Most salvagers die the first day they go down there."

He finally finished counting. "Yep, it's 32,000 alright." Grick neatly aligned all the paper bills before putting them back into the envelope. "But Willem... are you really okay with this?"

"With what?"

"It took you half a year to get this 30,000... you have 150,000 left, so even if things go well it'll take another two and a

half years."

"Oh, that. Sorry, but right now I can't really bring in the dough any faster."

"Well I'm not rushing you or anything, but…." Grick paused to stuff the envelope into a tattered leather bag. "As you know, this island is mainly filled with markless hating beast people. You're not going to be able to find any decent work. Right now you're just barely scraping by with random low paying jobs, aren't you?"

"Ah… well…." Willem avoided eye contact.

Grick narrowed his eyes. "So this money is almost your entire earnings from the last six months?"

"Minus some spending for food… lately jobs haven't been providing meals."

"That's not the real problem here," Grick said with a sigh. He started tapping his

muscular Borgle fingers on the table, obviously irritated. “Are you doing anything else with your life besides paying off your debt? That’s what I was trying to say… it’s been half a year since you’ve awoken. Haven’t you found anything you want to do? Anything you want to enjoy?”

“Well… you know, they say just living life is fun by itself…”

“Don’t give me that sorry excuse of a justification for living a boring life.” Grick cut off Willem sharply. “I live for what I enjoy. A sea of treasure lies down there on the ground. Materials and technologies we don’t have up here are just rolling around for anyone to take. Searching for those and bringing them back to sell is what I enjoy. Coming up empty and being in the hole… well that spices things up in its own way. Accidently stepping into the nest of a ‘The 6th’… moments like those are when I feel the most alive.”

For a moment, Grick had a faraway look in his eyes, reminiscing about his past adventures. “That’s what we salvagers do. So what about you, Willem? If you’re the serious type who likes to just work hard, then that’s fine with me… but have you thought about what you’re going to do after you pay off this debt?”

“Isn’t this coffee kinda salty?” An almost too obvious attempt to dodge the question. Grick gave him a funny look, but, still unable to find an answer, Willem gave a half-hearted laugh. Another awkward silence followed.

In general, Borgles are relatively simple people; they just follow their instincts. Of course some variation exists among individuals, but Grick was such a clear and logical thinker that it almost made Willem doubt his identity. He was also a nice guy, an aspect of Grick’s personality that Willem often had trouble with.

“Say, Willem… I might have a job for you. Why don’t you give it a try?” Grick broke the silence with a question. “I know someone looking for people… it’s a decent job, but it involves working with markless for a long period of time, so she can’t find many prospects. I’m guessing you don’t have any problems working with markless, though.”

“Why can’t you do it? I mean, you’re able to put up with me.”

“I’m a salvager. My soul lives down there, on the ground. Any job that traps me up here would drive me crazy,” Grick said with a chuckle. “As for what you’ll be doing on the job… well, simply put, you’ll be managing the Winged Guard’s secret weapons.”

“The army? Secret weapons?” Those words didn’t have a very peaceful connotation.

The word ‘army’, here on Regul Aire, usually refers to the official organization made to counter invasions from the ‘17 Beasts’. Even with the quite literal high ground, the Winged Guard understandably still has great difficulty against the Beasts. After all, they are the enemies who destroyed all life forms on the land. To secure any additional firepower possible, the army has been using any and all methods available — or at least that’s the word on the street.

“I can’t fight anymore. You know that.”

“I know, I know. Just because I said army doesn’t mean you’re going to go off to battle to beat things up. There are some more behind the scenes desk jobs, you know?”

“... like what?” Grick’s description didn’t give Willem a very good image of this job. “Is it the type of job that any old part time

worker can do?"

"I don't think that would go too well. If it's the paperwork you're worried about, I can take care of that." Grick let out another laugh. "Anyways, listen up. I hear that those secret weapons are effectively managed and maintained all by the Orlandri General Trading Company. As you know, the law prohibits civilians from possessing weapons above a certain power level.

"However, to the army, Orlandri is a major sponsor, so they don't want to damage relations with them. On top of that, even if the Winged Guard were to collect those weapons, they wouldn't be able to manage or maintain them with their current technological and financial resources."

"So on paper, the army owns the weapons... but in actuality, it's the trading company in control?"

“Exactly. The army sends a token supervisor over, but doesn’t do anything else. To any real soldier, that supervisor is a useless job. You have almost no authority, and the results of your work can’t be made public since you’re managing secret weapons. A big step backwards for any soldier’s career. That’s why they’ve starting looking for people outside the army.”

Grick stared down Willem with his amber Borgle eyes. “Like I said, I can get you an official title as a soldier. Since the supervisor doesn’t actually do anything, you don’t need any special skills. Just need to have some patience and keep your mouth shut. All in all, the pay’s pretty good. You’ll be able to pay off your entire debt and still have some left over.

“Use that money and find your own way in life. I know you have special circumstances, but don’t waste the life given to you. That’s what the others and I

wa–.” Grick shook his head. “Ah, sorry… it seems I’m getting a little soft from seeing so many friends pass away.” The Borgle man’s face twisted into a bitter smile.

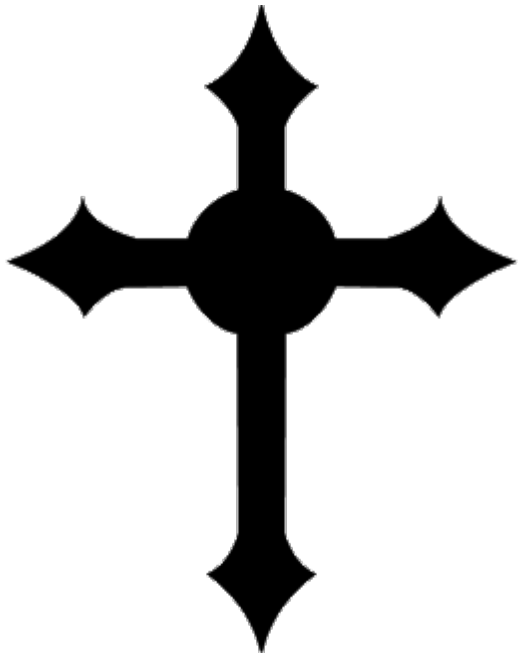
It was getting harder to decline the offer. “Alright, tell me more of the details about this job.”

“You’re going to take it?”

“I’ll decide after hearing a little more. So don’t say anything that’ll make it impossible for me to refuse.”

“Got it. First of all….” An evident happiness showing on his face, Grick looked down at his cup of coffee. “Kinda salty… this coffee.” He let out hearty laugh.

Grick was a logical thinker and a surprisingly sympathetic Borgle. In other words, a nice guy. Willem had just a little trouble with that part of him sometimes.



The over a hundred floating islands making up Regul Aire have a numbering system. In the middle of the group sits the 1st Floating Island, and from there the numbers spread out in a spiral pattern. As you go out from the center, the numbers get larger and larger.

However, there are a few special things to take into consideration. The central islands, up to around number forty, rest fairly close to their neighbors. In some of the extreme

cases, two islands can even be connected by bridge. This close proximity between islands promotes cultural and economic exchange, which in turn lead to prosperous towns.

On the other hand, islands near the edge, after number seventy or so, have great distances between them and are usually small in size themselves. As a result, towns are less numerous, less populated, and of course less prosperous. Some may be so isolated that the public communication airships don't even stop by on their route.

The facility where Willem needed to go for his new job was located on the 68th Island. Far enough out to be unreachable directly by public communication airships, the island required some more creative means to get to. Buying or renting a private airship was financially infeasible, so Willem opted to take the public airship to the 53rd Island, the closest stop to his destination.

From there, he hired a ferryman to take him across.

His calculations were perfect — except for one thing, which Willem noticed the moment he arrived on the 68th Island. The sun had completely gone down.

A strong, chilling wind blew past. “Haha... well this was a failure.” Standing alone in the deserted harbor, Willem laughed to himself. The hem of his coat, worn over his new army uniform, fluttered violently in the wind.

The ferryman hurried back home to the 53rd Island immediately after dropping Willem off, so there was no going back. He spotted a sign, worn down from exposure to the elements. According to it, the nearest town sat 2000 malumel to the right, while the Orlandri Trading Company’s 4th warehouse sat 500 malumel to the left. Next to the sign, two red wooden arrows

pointed in opposite directions.

"This must be it," Willem muttered to himself, recognizing the name Orlandri. The arrow pointed towards a narrow path which led right into the middle of a thick forest. Of course, not a single street lamp or anything else convenient was in sight. While walking through the place without any light didn't sound like very much fun, Willem couldn't just sit here and wait for morning. He thought about heading the other way to the town and finding an inn, but that path was still fairly long and certainly not much brighter. Looking up at the starry sky one last time, Willem sighed and stepped into the darkness.

The stars sometimes peeked out from gaps between the trees, giving Willem just enough light to stay on the path. Navigating like that, however, caused his pace to become laughably slow.

It's dark. Needless to say, Willem knew that before he set foot into the forest. *I can't even see where I'm stepping.* This too, he knew beforehand, but still he couldn't help but complain to himself.

Trudging along, Willem suddenly remembered a fairy tale he read as a kid. A boy entered a forest one summer night and never came home again. In the forest, a group of fairies kidnapped him and took him away to their country in another world — or something like that. At the time, Willem thought that the same thing might happen to him, so he vowed to never go close to a forest at night. His master and the "Daughter" teased him endlessly about that. Now that he was no longer a little boy, it seemed like a funny story, but...

"There are no dangerous animals out here... right?"

Between being kidnapped by fairies and

being eaten by wild animals, the latter seemed to be the more relevant issue at the moment. This forest and the 68th Island itself were both quite large by Regul Aire standards. The place could be considered a close imitation of the nature once found on land, so he couldn't rule out the possibility of a wolf or a bear popping out of the darkness.

Could I survive a bear attack? Willem asked himself. For his past self, a couple wild animals would be no problem. In his current state, however, having lost all of his power, he couldn't be so sure.

He felt something wet beneath his feet. It seems like he strayed from the path slightly while lost in thought. From the faint smell of water, along with the sound and texture of the ground, Willem guessed that he had stumbled into a wetland.

The mixing of the water, dirt, and wind

produced a unique scent that, for some reason, he found very nostalgic. *Is this place really in the sky?* Thinking about home, wading through the pitch black swamp, Willem put on a bitter smile.

Out of the corner of his eye, he caught a glimpse of light. The glowing ball swung violently from side to side while gradually growing larger. Something was coming.

"Someone coming to pick me up?"

When the ferryman's airship landed at the harbor here, the facility might have been notified somehow. In that case, it wouldn't be surprising if a technician or researcher or someone saw the signal and came to meet him.

Aw, you didn't have to walk all the way out here just to get me. Willem played out a conversation in his head as he headed toward the light.

“Take that!!”

The light jumped into the air. A battle cry, slightly too cute to qualify as a scream, rang through the damp air. Willem saw a wooden sword poking out of the darkness, descending from above at a surprisingly fast rate.

Why?! He tried in vain to think of a reason why he was being suddenly attacked. *Anyway, this is bad.* Simply avoiding this attack would be easy. The problem was that the attacker, currently leaping through the air, would draw out a perfect parabola as determined by the laws of physics and fly straight into the marshy ground behind Willem.

What to do... what to do. Before his head could come up with a reasonable course of action, his body started moving on its own. Willem took a step forward, positioning himself under the arc that the wooden

sword drew in the air. He spread out his arms and took the full force of the attacker's body. *Ouch. Heavier than I thought... I don't think my legs can hold much longer*.

His instincts as a soldier did their work, switching his body into battle mode and trying to activate the Venom inside his body. This process would usually strengthen his muscles and accelerate his decision making, but instead Willem was met with a sharp pain throughout his entire body. The strength in his arms faded, and he collapsed backwards, landing in the wetland with a loud splash.

By the time the water settled down, most of the heat in Willem's soaked body had been stolen. A small flame, most likely created by Venom, ignited in the attacker's right hand. The light seemed to create its own little world, cut off from the surrounding darkness.

The attacker sat on top of Willem's stomach and looked down at him with a smug face. Willem caught a glimpse of light purple hair and eyes.

"Panival! What are you doing?!"

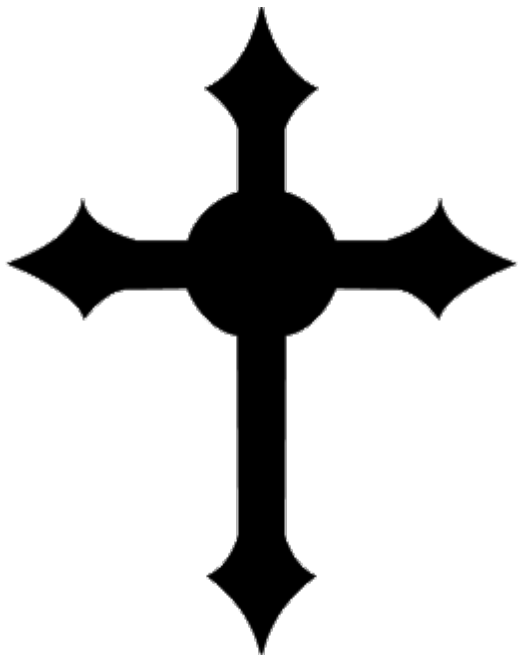
A second magic light, dancing between the trees, approached. Before long, another young girl appeared out of the dark. Willem recognized her familiar sky blue hair.

The purple girl sitting on top of him raised her head and boasted to the newcomer. "The suspicious character has been defeated."

"You shouldn't run around here, the ground's all wet so it's dangero — eh?" The familiar girl looked at Willem with a surprised face. "The suspicious character… you? Why?"

"Hey… long time no see…." He raised his

hand slightly in an attempted wave and smiled at the girl.



Of course, Willem couldn't stay dripping wet like that forever. After a long bath and a change of clothes, he stood in front of a mirror. A black haired man stared back at him with black eyes that seemed void of any ambition. The faint smile that he wore appeared so natural, as if his face muscles were permanently bent into that shape.

In order to hide his being a markless, Willem once tried to put on fake horns and fangs. However, they looked so hideous that it almost made him depressed. He concluded that those facial features were meant to express one's wild side, so they didn't go very well with people that didn't have any wild qualities about them.

While checking around his body to see if he missed any mud or if any pain still lingered, Willem reflected on how pitifully weak he had become. Just trying to ignite a little Venom led to this mess. In the past, he could have conjured up a battle ready flame in his sleep.

Well, I guess there's no point in thinking about stuff I already lost. Willem stepped out into the hallway of the army facility — which didn't look like one at all. The floor consisted of old, worn out wooden boards, and plaster covered the walls. A few rooms lined the hallway at even spaced intervals.

Pasted on the wall next to Willem were three sheets of paper: one displaying the rotation order for chore duties, one warning of a dysfunctional toilet on the second floor, and one saying “Don’t run in the hallways!”.

Last of all, he spotted young girls peeking out from behind various objects, all trying to sneak a look at the strange new man.

“This way.”

The blue haired girl led him around. Getting another chance to look at her up close, Willem readjusted his age estimate to about fifteen, based on human standards. A markless, she had a body and features similar to those of a human. What set her apart was her brilliant blue hair, evocative of a clear spring sky. An Emnetwyte would never have been able to achieve such a naturally vivid color, no matter what dye he used.

Compared to when they met at the Briki Shopping District, the girl seemed to be more calm and took a colder attitude. But even so, Willem could tell that wasn't her true personality. Every time she had some confusion or uncertainty, it showed clearly in her ocean blue eyes.

They say it doesn't matter how you act on a trip because you'll never see those people again. The lively girl that Willem saw a couple days ago must have been a result of that mindset. She reminded him of a comrade he worked with long ago, someone who had a hard time being honest with himself. As he ran through memories of his old friend, a smile spread across his face.

"W-what is it?"

"Ah, nothing. Keep going."

Occasionally the girl would nervously turn to Willem, looking like she wanted to

say something, but then immediately turn back around and put more distance between them. Unable to take a more familiar attitude because of this, Willem silently trailed a few steps behind. The girl with the purple hair, Panival, who appeared to be around ten years old, curiously looked at the awkward couple.

After a short walk, they arrived at a cozy room, which had a small table and chair, a bookshelf, a bed, and various convenient accessories scattered about.

“This is supposed to be a warehouse, isn’t it?” The question that Willem had been asking himself ever since he entered this place suddenly slipped out.

“A typical reaction.”

A woman sat in the room. Another markless. Judging from her appearance, she looked to be about eighteen, the same age as Willem, or a little older. Light red

hair fell down to about shoulder height. Her grass green eyes fixed intently on Willem, and she wore a similar colored blouse with a white apron on top. Her gentle and well mannered behavior gave off a rather elegant impression.

“Welcome to the secret weapon warehouse,” the woman said with a smile. “Long time no see, Willem. Have you gotten taller?”

“... why are you here Naigrat?” Willem groaned.

A faint crashing sound came from outside the room, but Willem pretended he didn’t hear it.

“Why? Well, this is where I work, of course. I was surprised when I heard from Grick. Wouldn’t have expected you to get sent here. Oh, congratulations on the promotion, Willem Kumesh, Second Enchanted Weapons Technician. To get

such a position the same day you joined the military… rising up through the ranks pretty fast, huh?"

"Don't make fun of me… I know it's an empty title. By the way… the 'someone looking for people to help out with a decent job' that Grick mentioned…"

"Ah, that was probably me."

"That bastard." Willem made a mental note to punch Grick next time they met. He was probably ready for it, given that he knowingly set this trap for Willem.

"Anyway, the forest at this time is pretty scary isn't it? If you contacted us, we could have picked you up at a nearby island or something."

Naigrat gestured for Willem to sit. A tea set was laid out on the table, probably prepared during his bath.

“I’m not used to such long airship rides… the 28th Island is a lot farther away from here than I thought. I’ll let you know in advance next time then. ”

“Please do… by the way, those clothes look great on you.”

“Except the person currently wearing them finds it tight and hard to breathe…”

“Don’t say such sad things Willem… compared to right after you awoke, you look about twenty percent more delicious.”

“… so my risk of dying has also increased by twenty percent.”

“Aw, don’t be so mean… you can trust me. I told you before, didn’t I? Even if I’m a Troll and you’re an extremely rare dish, I don’t intend to eat you.” Naigrat clapped her palms together, tilted her head slightly to the side, and continued. “I mean, it would be a shame to waste the last human

in the world just to satisfy one moment's hunger."

Willem had to admit that he found her gesture cute, but her words sent chills running down his spine.

"Of course, if you say it's okay to eat you, then I'll think about it..."

"No. Definitely not okay."

"Hmm? Are you sure you won't change your mind? What about just one arm? One finger?"

Willem sighed. The longer this conversation continued, the more dangerous it got for him.

Trolls, classic examples of monsters, often appeared in ghost stories told by travelers back in Willem's time. A handsome man or beautiful woman would be living all alone in a house far away from

any town. When tired travelers came by, he would invite them in, welcome them with a feast, take care of them, then, in the middle of the night, eat them.

Until recently, Willem thought those stories were all just myths, stories created to teach new travelers not to let their guard down in unknown lands. When he found out that Trolls actually existed as a type of Ogre, Willem had stood dumbfounded, mouth gaping open, for a good five minutes. After that, the person who told him, which happened to be Naigrat, laughed at him, saying something like "I don't know how to feel about being thought of as a mythical creature".

Willem heard a tapping sound from outside the room again. He sensed a few presences stirring about, but again decided to ignore them.

"Let's talk about work... I was told I hardly

have to do anything, but I haven't heard any real details. What am I supposed to do starting tomorrow? Or rather, is there anything I should be doing today?"

"Hmm... let's see. Are you planning on staying here?"

"Of course. I was sent here to manage these "weapons", so I should at least live in the same place with them."

"The previous two people in your position showed up on the first day then left and never came back, you know?"

"Seriously!?" It sounded like this job was more of a joke than Willem thought.

"So if you said 'like I would ever live here!' and went off to stay somewhere else on the island, there wouldn't really be any problem..."

"This isn't one of those things where you

say it's okay, but as soon as I turn my back you stab me or something, is it?"

"What kind of person do you think I am..."

A human eating Ogre, of course.

Willem gave a long sigh. "Well, it's against my principles to just abandon a job, even if it is meaningless. I came here intending to stay."

"Really? Great!" exclaimed Naigrat, placing her hands beside her mouth. "Well then, I have to hurry and get your room ready. Oh, you must be hungry too. There might be something left over in the dining hall... tomorrow I'll make you a feast, so look forward to it!"

Another sigh. Willem had always found Naigrat a little hard to deal with. Ignoring the fact that she wanted to eat him (which is pretty hard to ignore), something about

her behavior... just didn't feel right to him, as a guy.

"Hehe... taking care of Willem... it's been about a year, hasn't it? I'm getting kind of excited."

Willem was a man, and a young man at that. Being a young man, he had many complicated, uncontrollable emotions stored up inside his heart. In other words, a situation like this, being taken care of by a friendly young woman (who was also a similar race), made his heart flutter a bit.

However, he knew better than to misinterpret Naigrat's kindness, which probably had no romantic feelings behind it at all. Her affection was essentially of the same type that farmers give their cows or chickens. She was being nice to Willem to feed the cycle [raise with lots of love] —> [eat].

Calm down, instincts. Activate, reason. The

person in front of your eyes is a predator. Your heart is beating fast because your life is in danger. Don't get the wrong idea. Willem told himself this over and over until his heartbeat returned to normal.

"Why the gloomy face?" The young woman remained completely oblivious to the young man's internal struggle.

"Just want to make sure one more time... you're not going to eat me, right?"

"No no, I really just want to take care of you. Trolls have a natural desire to give their guests a reception as friendly as possible. I promise I won't eat you (yet)."

"Ookayy... why don't you repeat what you just said under your breath one more time, loud and clear."

"Hm? I didn't say anything." Naigrat responded nonchalantly, then quietly stood up and went to open the door.

An avalanche of orange, green, purple, and pink spilled out onto the carpet. Four young girls, all looking about ten years old, with very colorful hair, piled on top of each other.

“Hey! Don’t push!” cried one girl pinned under her partners in crime.

“S-S-Sorry! Sorry!” wailed another while repeatedly bowing her head.

“Ayy Naigrat, what’s up?” the one named Panival said coolly.

“Hey! My bad!” The last girl casually apologized with an energetic grin.

All the girls started talking at once. Naigrat, paying no attention to them, put both hands behind her back, stood up tall, and uttered a single command. “Go back to your rooms.”

One of the girls cautiously raised her hand. “Um… before that, we wanted to introduce ourselves to the new supervisor. …”

The others nodded in agreement.

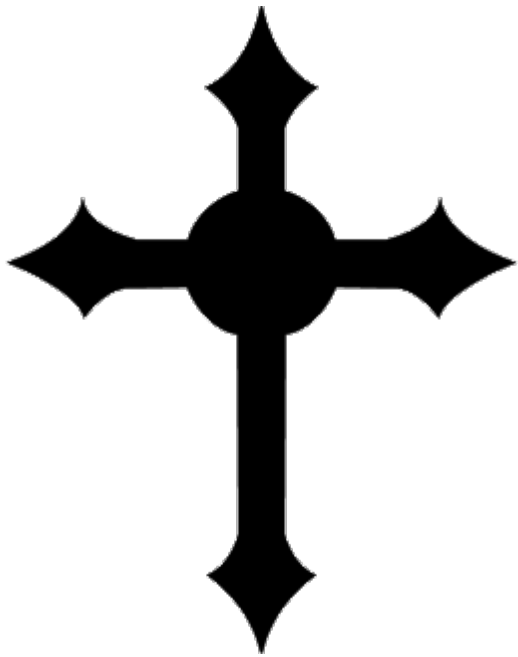
“Did you hear what I said?” She cocked her head slightly to the side and gave the girls a stern look. Then, she smiled. “Or, if you won’t listen… I might eat you up!” Even when threatening the girls, she talked in a soft, gentle voice, like a mother comforting her baby.

Without a moment’s hesitation, the little girls disappeared from the room. An impressively executed retreat.

“Well then, let’s get going.” Naigrat turned around and called Willem.

“Ah….” Still a little overwhelmed by the situation, he barely managed a response.

Throughout their meal, Naigrat, now in a cheerful mood, smiled and hummed quietly while eyeing him. Thanks to that, Willem felt a little uncomfortable the whole time.



The manager's room had almost nothing in it. While the room itself wasn't small, it contained only a bed, an empty closet, and a lamp hung on the wall. No carpet covered the hard, wooden floor, and no curtain covered the window. The view outside was

pure black, as if the window had been painted over with ink. Just staring outside, Willem felt like he would be sucked in, or rather crushed, by the overwhelming darkness.

Pretty good room, Willem thought. Up until then, he had been living in an apartment complex made for Borgle laborers. Besides the cleanliness issue, Willem also found it impossible to sleep in the provided beds as a result of the body size difference between him and a Borgle. Every night, he would lie on the floor and curl up in a blanket. Compared to that, almost every room seemed like heaven.

Willem threw his luggage on the floor and tested out the bed. The soft mattress and faintly fragrant sheets gradually cured the fatigue in his body, inviting him into a deep sleep.

"– before that…"

He managed to peel his back off the bed before he actually fell asleep. First, he needed to get out of his sweltering army uniform. After that, he stuffed the few plain clothes he brought into the closet. There didn't seem to be any space to put his other belongings, which didn't consist of much, so he left them in his bag.

It's quiet. The silence comforted Willem, who had grown used to the omnipresent tumult on the 28th Island. — *or maybe not...*

"Do you think he's asleep?"

"I don't know... it's my first time seeing a boy."

"Keep your voice down a little. He might notice us."

A few whispers from beyond the door broke the peaceful silence. *Probably the kids chased out by Naigrat earlier... they really don't give up.*

Willem, holding his breath, tip toed toward the door without making a single sound. He put his hand on the doorknob, counted to three, then threw it open. The little girls tumbled into the room, making the second avalanche of the day.

"W-What?!"

"S-Sorry! Sorry!"

"Hey, Mr. Supervisor! Fine evening, isn't it?"

Willem crouched down to make eye contact with the girls and held a finger to his mouth. They blinked in surprise for a second, but then held up their own fingers to their lips, guessing what Willem wanted to say.

You'll get eaten by Naigrat. All of them, the girls and Willem, seemed to whisper the same thing just by looking at each other. No matter the time or place, when you

want to get kids to do something, you first scare them with the presence of a demon.

Willem gestured for the girls to come in the room. There weren't enough chairs for all of them, but they would certainly be caught just standing in the doorway. The instant they entered the room, the girls crowded Willem up against the wall.

"Where did you come from!? What race are you!?"

"What's going on between you and Naigrat? Your conversation sounded pretty deep!"

"Do you have a girlfriend? What type of girl do you like?"

"Do you have a favorite food? Or foods that you can't eat?"

"By the way, out of all the questions we just asked, which one would you answer

first?”

Like a torrential flood, questions poured forth endlessly until Willem held up his hand, signaling them to stop.

“I’ll answer your question first. I don’t have a girlfriend, but I like kind and reliable women a little older than me. My favorite food is super spicy meat, and there shouldn’t be anything I can’t eat — but a few days ago when I saw a Reptrace lunch box I almost threw up. My relationship with Naigrat is like that of a farmer and his stray cow. Until this morning I lived on the 28th Island. As for my race… apparently I have a lot of different blood mixed in so I don’t really know.” Willem answered every single question, pointing at the ones who asked them as he went.

Gasps of admiration came from the girls’ mouths. Satisfied with himself, Willem laughed smugly. As a result of being raised

in an orphanage, entertaining little children was one of his specialties. By the way, whenever the 'Daughter', raised in the same orphanage, saw Willem like this, she would call him creepy.

Ahh... kids are great. Girls, unlike women — especially a particular evil troll — didn't confuse Willem with any suggestive behavior. He didn't have to be suspicious of any ulterior motives behind their kindness. *Ahh... what wonderful creatures.*

"My name's Willem. I'll be helping out around here awhile."

"Are you going to live here?"

"Yep, it's part of my job, after all."

Another sigh of admiration. From the girls' hushed whispers, Willem could guess that an outsider coming to stay was an unprecedented event. It made sense, given that traveling to the 68th Island was no

easy task, as Willem found out earlier that day. So just having a new face around in and of itself must have been an exciting event for the girls.

“Hey! What are you guys doing?” A scolding voice came from the doorway.

The little girls froze up. Standing outside the room was not Naigrat, as Willem first thought, but the girl with the sky blue hair.

“He came a long way and must be tired, so don’t bother him. Isn’t that what Naigrat told you?”

“Umm... ahh...” mumbled the orange haired girl.

“I can’t stop my curiosity,” said purple hair.

“That’s it! It’s what you call an irresistible force!” exclaimed pink hair.

Cutting off the flurry of excuses, the blue

haired girl scolded them once again. “Naigrat told you, right?”

“Yes ma’am!!”

The little girls scattered in another perfect retreat. Willem heard voices calling out goodbye echoing farther and farther down the hallway.

“Hmph, they never listen to people.” She looked over at Willem. “Sorry about that… the little ones are always being annoying.”

“I don’t mind… I’m used to being around kids.”

“Well I’m glad, but don’t spoil them too much. If you leave them unchecked they’ll go wild.”

“Haha, I’ll be careful.” Willem laughed, which for some reason the girl responded to with a gulp, as if scared.

A short silence. The girl, who Willem

thought would leave soon after driving off the kids, didn't budge.

She seemed to remember something. "Ah... sorry about Panival earlier in the forest. She was a little too energetic... she didn't mean to harm you."

"It's fine... I'm not mad at all. Thanks to my bath, I won't catch a cold or anything."

"Oh... I see... umm...." She paused again. "Kutori..."

"Hm?"

"My name. How to say this... it's kind of awkward since I told you to forget about me earlier... of course you don't have to remember it... but I thought since you're here and all... I should at least tell you my name."

"Ah...." Willem thought for a second. *Oh, that's right. We never knew each other's names.*

“I’m Willem. Nice to meet you, Kutori.”

She took a moment to gather her breath. “Also… umm….” Unable to find the right words, she finally said, “Nevermind. Sorry for bothering you… hope you rest well.”

As Kutori turned around to leave, Willem suddenly remembered something. He had forgotten amidst the confusion of his unexpected reunion with Naigrat, but a question had been sitting in the corner of his mind ever since he arrived.

“Wait… I wanted to ask you something.”

“Eh?”

The door, which had just been shut, slowly creaked open again.

“I came here as the manager of the Trading Company’s weapons.”

The girl nodded.

“And this place is a warehouse to store those weapons.”

“Mhm.” She nodded a second time.

“But no matter how many times I look around, this place doesn’t seem like a warehouse to me. Where are the weapons?” He looked around the room. He looked out the window. Wherever he looked, all Willem saw was a residential building. No trace of a warehouse.

Or maybe when he heard that they were used to fight the ‘17 Beasts’, Willem just assumed the weapons would be huge golems or something, but in reality they weren’t so big. In that case, maybe the weapons could all be stored in one room somewhere. But still, one more mystery remained.

“And… I don’t know if I should be asking you directly, but what are you guys? Why are you living in this supposed army

facility?”

For a second, Kutori stared blankly at Willem. “You came here without even knowing that?” She narrowed her eyes. “On top of that, you played with those kids without knowing their situation? Are you the type of person who just acts without thinking?”

“Ah….” Willem could say nothing in return. He was well aware that he sometimes acted irrationally.

“Well, whatever. It’s not like it’s a secret, so I’ll tell you. The answer to your first question is your second question. The answer to your second question is your first question.”

“Huh?” A riddle of an answer. “What does that mean?”

“You shouldn’t have to think too hard. It’s exactly as I said. We are the weapons you’re

talking about."

— *Ah.*

It took some time for his brain to process meaning of her words.

Kutori waved her hand. "Well then, nice to meet you, Mr. Supervisor." She walked out the door and closed it shut.

『The Forest in the Sky』

-late autumn night's dream-

I The Superficial Supervisor

What am I? Willem often asked himself this question.

A long, long time ago, he lived in an orphanage, where he met his master. The master raised him and taught him everything he needed to know in order to survive. The master also happened to be fundamentally a horrible person. Normally, as the manager of the orphanage, he should have acted as a replacement for the children's parents. However, he completely neglected that responsibility, leaving Willem, who was only a little older than the other kids, to take on the role of 'Father'.

The master would often get drunk and take every opportunity to tell made up stories about how he used to be a Regal

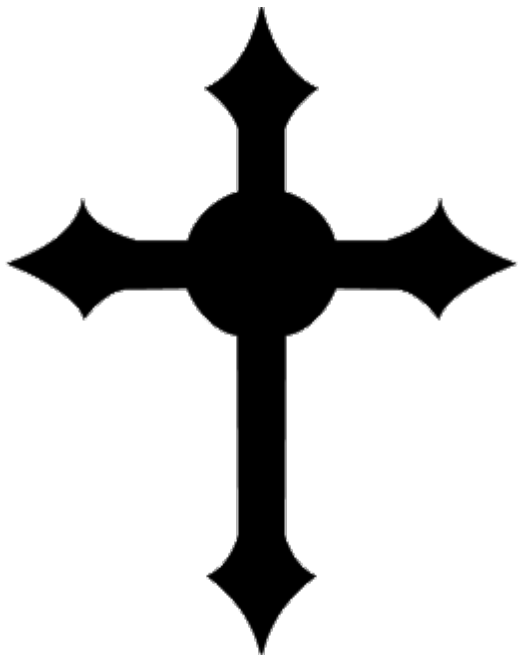
Brave. While he was relatively strong, skilled with swords, and strangely knowledgeable, the children all agreed that he looked more like a bad guy than a hero.

Willem could think of many other examples, but if he started counting all of the master's vices he would never stop. Whistling inappropriately at random girls in town, making little kids read odd books, not shaving his wild facial hair no matter how much others told him to — never being home at the most important moments. The list went on and on. So the young Willem vowed to never become an adult like that.

Among the master's many sayings, this one stuck with Willem the most: "Take care of women. Men cannot escape from them. Also take care of children. Adults cannot win against them. Against a girl, prepare yourself. No matter what we do, we are no match for them." When the master told

Willem this, he didn't pay much attention. He didn't want to think about such bothersome things. But unfortunately, along with many of the master's other teachings, it became part of his guiding principles.

Thanks to that, others sometimes suspected Willem of being into little girls — but he preferred to not think about those times.



Not having to do anything was not only an even more accurate description of Willem's job than he thought, but also more painful than he imagined. Come to think of it, for the past six months he had always been pressed for time, running from one low paying job to the next. From early in the morning until late at night, or sometimes until early the next morning, he worked until he could work no more. As for sleep, his only choice was to sneak in a few hours whenever he happened to be free, regardless of the time of day.

So getting a good night's sleep in a soft bed and waking up to the sun's warm rays just by themselves were incomparable comforts for Willem. But he had a difficult time adjusting to his new situation of not having various tasks looming over him 24/7. His mind, taking advantage of this freedom, brought back memories he would rather forget and lingered on thoughts he would rather not think about.

Willem was also still not totally comfortable in his new home, the so-called "warehouse". In total, about thirty children lived in the facility, all of them girls, with ages ranging from seven to fifteen. Moreover, they all had vivid, almost transparent brightly colored hair. The palette of colors seemed almost otherworldly, like something out of an abstract painting, but for some reason the girls' hair didn't feel unnatural to Willem, perhaps because the colors were not dyed on.

None of the girls had much experience with adults, especially with men, so almost all of them remained wary of Willem or even outright avoided him. He figured that the bunch who burst into his room on the first day must have been an exception. Well, he couldn't blame the girls. They had been raised in their own little world, completely isolated within the warehouse. It was only natural that a sudden intruder,

and a strange looking, large one at that, not receive a warm welcome.

Walking through the hallways, he always sensed a few presences hidden in the shadows. But whenever he turned around, he could only spot the backs of small children running for their lives. After a while, Willem began to feel guilty just getting out of his room and walking anywhere.

Of course, even if he just holed up in his room all day, there was nothing to do. He had no notable hobbies, and working out didn't have much meaning anymore since he no longer fought. Willem didn't mind sitting by the window and just staring outside once in a while, but wasting away the next few months like that didn't seem very appealing.

He decided to change things up a bit by visiting the nearest town. It consisted of

around a hundred stone buildings lined up on a gentle slope surrounded by the countryside, forming an idyllic setting drastically different in feel from the gloomy 28th Island.

As he walked down the streets, Willem noticed that none of the passersby seemed to take a special attitude toward him, despite him not wearing a robe or hood to cover his markless features. He decided to grab some lunch at a nearby restaurant and ask the owner about that.

“Hmm… well I guess we don’t really mind around here.” The young man, with a head like that of a chestnut colored dog’s, explained to Willem while shaking a frying pan around. “Talking behind people’s backs just because they look like bad guys from centuries ago… no point in doing that. If you want to, you can gossip about the guys doing bad things right now.

"Well, I guess in some places there are so many bad guys around that people just give up and target the markless. Since they've been discriminated against for generations past, it's easier that way. Don't even have to think about it. Us out here though, living peacefully and carefree, don't want any of that."

I see... that's how it is around here.

"Also... you may not know since you're not from around here, but there's someone that lives nearby. A markless thousands of times more terrifying than any Emnetwyte of the past. Anyone who sees that smile will forget about history and just be grateful that they're even alive."

... I see.

Half listening to the chef's talk while absentmindedly waiting for his food, Willem suddenly heard a voice from behind.

“Hm? Oh, it’s you…”

A familiar face walked over. The girl with the clear sky blue hair.

“Hey, Kutori… and…”

Two other girls followed behind, both about the same age as Kutori. All together, they were the three oldest of the children living in the warehouse, although that wasn’t saying much.

“Oooh, the handsome man everyone’s been talking about lately!” A girl with faded gold hair came running up and stuck her face right in front of Willem’s. “Also, only greeting Kutori by name? Since when did you guys become so close, hmm?”

“Cut it out.”

“Fiiinee.” She drew back in response to Kutori’s cold voice.

“It’s not like there’s anything between us…

I just happened to meet him earlier than the others, so I got a chance to tell him my name... that's all."

"Hmm... well if you say so."

"It's the truth."

"Okay, okay. Well then, Second Enchanted Weapons Technician, it would be great if you could remember our names as well... this noisy girl right here is Aiseia, and that –." She turned around and pointed at the third girl, sitting at a table in the corner with a blank face. "The one minding her own business over there is Nephren. Pleased to meet ya."

"Well that was a creative introduction... I'm guessing you already know my name?"

"Of course! Also, your favorite food is spicy meat, you aren't too picky but Reptrace lunch boxes are no go, you like kindhearted older girls... right?"

“Wait, Aiseia… I didn’t hear about any of this.” Kutori, apparently not informed by the little girls from the avalanche, looked at Aiseia suspiciously.

“Hehehe… those who control the information control the island. A little spying can go a long way, ya know…”

“Tell me!”

Energetically going back and forth at each other, the pair moved over to where Nephren sat.

“What’s this all about? You’re acquaintances with the young ladies from the warehouse?” The dog headed Lucantrobos came by to deliver Willem’s lunch: a baked potato, assorted vegetables, thick strips of bacon, a small piece of bread, and lastly a cup of soup.

“Yeah… recently moved into that warehouse for my job.”

“Hmm? That warehouse… living in….” For some reason, all the chestnut color began to drain from the cook’s face. “AHHH!!” With terrific speed, the young man drew back and stuck his body against the wall, limbs trembling. “S-Sorry please don’t kill me please don’t eat me I have a family to take care of!”

An unexpected reaction, but Willem could see where the misunderstanding might have sprung from.

“I’m not a troll, you know…”

“I’m still in debt from this restaurant so I probably don’t taste good and — eh? What’d you just say?”

The Lucantrobos stopped his flailing motions for a second and blinked.

“I said I’m not a troll… I know it’s hard to tell the difference between markless races, but I’m not going to eat you or anything, so

calm down…"

"B-But, surely you must be the same race if you live under the same roof as that 'Red Stomach'."

"Wait… have people from this town been eaten before?" Watching the young man's terrified face, Willem thought of a possibility he really didn't want to consider. If it were true… that would be no good, to say the least. While the different islands of Regul Aire foster varying cultures, they are all tied together under common laws. And according to those laws, the murder of any intelligent life form constitutes a serious crime, even for hungry trolls.

"Well… no… but…." The young man's dog ears drooped. "Until just recently, there was a shady Orc organization around here. Named 'Black Fur'… well anyways this organization –"

"Ah, that's enough… I can see where this

story is going."

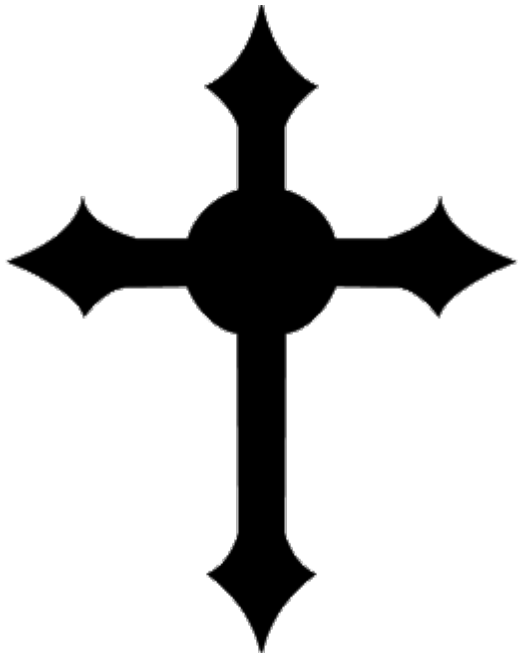
Willem figured that the Black something or other organization did something to the girls, then Naigrat went to obliterate them and was witnessed laughing maniacally while covered in blood. *Not surprising really... she would definitely do something like that*. But, well... Naigrat helped Willem out in the past, was one of his few acquaintances, and was now his coworker, so he figured he should try to back her up.

"Naigrat doesn't just go around eating people for no reason. She might be misunderstood... or rather feared because of moments like those, but normally she's a nice lady. That is, if you ignore her impatience or short temper or how she always talks about eating people... well anyway, there's nothing really to be afraid of."

In general, when she smiles and asks "can

I eat you?", 90% of the time it's a joke... a rather dark joke. But you know she doesn't actually intend to eat you, so there's no reason to be scared. Willem preferred to not think about the remaining 10%.

"Wow... you're amazing." For some reason, the cook stared at Willem with a great amount of respect in his eyes.



The strongest weapon. Throughout history, no matter the time nor place, that

has been the woman. Well, it's obvious if you think about it. Girls are the fastest and easiest way to raise the morale of soldiers, a fact that has been true since ancient days.

The vanity of men cannot be underestimated. On the battlefield, amidst the chaos and repeated life or death struggles, soldiers throw away visions of victory, dreams of glory, their dignity… but until their last breath they refuse to give up on one thing: they cannot look bad in front of a girl. Just that simple motive will instill the greatest vitality into a broken soldier waiting for his death.

The best armies knew that effect well and made sure to always mix a few women in with the savages on the battlefield. The supply unit or medic team worked fine, but positions closer to the front lines always had more of an impact. A female knight, deftly wielding her sword, running through the battlefield. A peerless female Brave

chosen by her Kaliyon. A thaumaturgist hiding powerful arcane magic within her delicate body.

If someone like that was rumored to be on some battlefield somewhere, the idiot soldiers would cheer right up. Even stories of such people in long past battles or stories that hardly contained anything believable could add a pinch of hope to the dreariest of situations.

Willem knew one girl who was praised as a hero and revered as a legend among soldiers. Needless to say, she was strong, but her strength tended to be exaggerated by the guys. Hearing tales of her valorous deeds spread across the battlefield, she would simply laugh it off.

You shouldn't have to think too hard. It's exactly as I said. We are the weapons you're talking about.

Those words replayed through Willem's

head. It seemed like the young girls laughing and playing here in the warehouse differed from those other women. Of course, a hero created for the sole purpose of raising soldiers' morale needed to be more famous, which would also require her to be a more popular race, not a markless. Also, to put it simply, she would need to be appealing to the filthy, lustful hearts of men.

So something felt wrong about these girls, who were not only kept secret from the public but also way too young to fulfill the second point. Something about their situation clearly differed from those of the girl warriors that Willem used to know. In any case, whatever the true nature of the secret weapons or the young girls was, he had no need to be concerned. As a superficial supervisor, he simply needed to hang out around the warehouse without causing any trouble.

— At least, that's what Willem tried to convince himself of. After about three days, though, his patience reached its limit. The combination of seeing the little girls scared and knowing that the source of their fear was none other than himself pushed him over the edge.

"Hm? Ah, okay… that's fine with me, I guess…"

"Thanks a lot."

Willem requested to help out with dinner that day and borrowed a corner of the kitchen. Eggs, sugar, milk, and cream. A small pile of berries. A chicken bone to extract gelatin from. Having assembled any useful looking ingredients on the counter, Willem recalled the steps of his signature 'popular with little kids and easy to make dessert' recipe.

Time to get to work. He donned his personal apron and lighted the crystal

stove. His ears picked up the whispers of little spies crowded in the shadows, peering in at the kitchen.

"What in the world is he trying to do?"

Here in the warehouse, going into the kitchen when you're not on meal duty is strictly prohibited, so peeking inside from afar is the best you can do. Bearing the weight of many staring little eyes on the back of his neck, Willem continued his work. Over the past few days, he had come to the conclusion that the girls' tastes differed little from his own. Obviously, differences in gender and age can bring about some contrasting preferences, but the disconnect due to racial, and consequently physiological, differences is far more severe.

In the past, Willem once went out to eat with a Borgle friend (well... it was Grick). That experience scarred him for life. When

Willem said something tasted delicious, Grick would complain that it tasted like hell, and when Grick said something tasted delicious, to Willem it tasted like a nightmare.

They should have just given up there, but Grick insisted that they find something suitable to both their tastes at all costs. And from that point on, the day became worse than hell or any nightmare. It ended with both of them desperately gulping down water to wash out their mouths, tears streaming down their faces, while practically screaming “delicious! delicious!”.

Anyway, Willem figured that the girls’ tastes couldn’t be too different, seeing how they were able to sit in the same dining hall and eat the same food. He called over the girl on meal duty to have her sample his work. She glared at the caramel filled spoon as if she had found an alien by the roadside or something, but eventually

summoned up enough courage, shut both eyes tightly, and put the spoon in her mouth. After a few seconds of dead silence, the girl slowly opened her eyes and mumbled, “It’s delicious!” Silent cheers rose up from the onlooking spies.

In the end, it turned out alright. The girls who ordered the ‘special dessert’ stuck onto the corner of the menu at the last minute all had about the same reaction. They carried the first spoonful to their mouths looking like they were prepared to die. After a brief pause, the cafeteria would be filled with sparkling pairs of eyes.

Willem, now taking his turn to hide in the shadows and spy on the girls, struck a victorious pose outside the dining hall. As expected, a little sugar was all he needed to capture the stomachs of children.

“... what are you doing?”

Naigrat’s disapproving voice came from

behind.

“I got this recipe straight from my master. Hate to admit it, but he had a lot of influence over kids… this being proof. Back in the day, I fell victim to that dessert countless times.”

“Uh, not that. Even if you decide to do more work, you won’t get paid any more, you know?”

“I don’t care about that.” Willem scratched his face. “I felt bad seeing how they were all scared of me. If those girls are the weapons, then as their manager I don’t think I should be putting unnecessary stress on them. So this is… how to put it…”

He struggled to find the right words. He couldn’t even be sure that the sounds coming out of his mouth made any sense. But Willem had something he needed to say.

“It’s not like I’m trying to spoil them or anything. It’s just… if my being here has been a negative so far, I’m just trying to bring it back to zero. After all, it’s my ‘job’ to have no influence on anything whatsoever, isn’t it?”

“Well, if you say so… I don’t really mind.” Naigrat narrowed her eyes. “But… you said that strangely fast, it sounded like a forced excuse, and you looked like you were trying so hard to fool yourself it was embarrassing just to watch…. If you truly meant what you said, however, then you’ll hear no complaints from me.”

She saw straight through him.

“Sorry please don’t ask further please I beg you.”

“When I first met you, I thought you were a more apathetic and cynical person.”

“Ah… well….” Willem had thought that

too. He had once decided to live as that type of character, staying isolated from the people and events around him. So he himself was surprised at his actions just now. “I lost myself for a moment… from now on, I’ll be more careful.”

“I mean, it’s not really a bad thing… as long as those kids are happy, nothing else matters. Also….”

“Also what?”

“You smell even more delicious with that sugar scent all over.”

“From now on, I’ll really be more careful…”

Willem made a mental note to always take a shower after being in the kitchen.

2 The Girls of the Warehouse

Kutori Nota Seniolis is a fairy. This year she turned fifteen, making her the oldest girl currently in the warehouse and a fully grown fairy soldier. Her compatibility with 'Dug Weapons' having been confirmed, she had been assigned to the sword Seniolis, whose name she now bears.

A light shade of blue filled her hair and eyes, but she herself was not particularly fond of the color, for two reasons. First of all, as with any typical fairy hair, it attracted too much attention on the streets of town. Secondly, and more importantly, it didn't go well with brightly colored clothes.

"... what in the world are they doing?"

Kutori, sitting by the window in the

reading room and gazing outside, muttered to herself. A small clearing in the forest spread out in front of her eyes. Young fairies, along with a tall young man, excitedly chased a ball around. She hadn't really realized it until now, but Willem seemed to naturally merge into warehouse life, despite being a different age, gender, and even race.

The special dessert from a few days ago probably served as the catalyst. When the little ones found out that he made it himself, they instantly dissolved any suspicions of him. Then, before Kutori knew it, they had become attached to him, as evidenced by the ball game occurring before her.

"Seriously... what is with that guy?"

When they first met, Willem struck Kutori as a mystery; he was amazingly kind to her, a stranger, and an annoying one at

that, yet seemed to be shrouded in a sort of gloomy shadow. Moreover, he managed to live in a town of beast people despite being a markless himself.

The next time they met, Panival, one of the little ones, had him pinned underneath her in the forest. Now that she thought about it, Willem had also been squished beneath Kutori after her little skydive. *I hope he's not into that sort of thing....* She considered the possibility for a moment, but became embarrassed and shoved the thought out of her head.

And lastly... he was always nice to the little kids. Even when that noisy, shameless, annoying, bothersome, irritating group of girls burst into his room, he talked playfully with them without a single complaint or frown on his face and even took the same attitude towards Kutori, who appeared a little later.

The same attitude? Those words stuck in Kutori's mind, stopping the gears of her thoughts from turning any further. Could it be that Willem saw all of them in the exact same way? Could he be treating the fifteen year old, fully grown, mature, responsible Kutori Nota Seniolis the same way as those ten year old, immature little kids? She didn't want to believe it.

Besides, he — Second Enchanted Weapons Technician Willem Kumesh — wasn't even that much older than Kutori. Although his mysterious aura could be somewhat deceiving, she guessed his true age to be a little less than twenty. In that case, the age difference between them came out to a mere three or four years, making them basically the same within experimental error. His age gave him no right to treat her like a kid.

Or maybe, their height difference was to blame. But even then, the problem

remained serious. Kutori Nota Seniolis happened to proudly hold the title of tallest fairy in the warehouse. She supposed that, from Willem's very high point of view, she might still look fairly close to the others. Having Naigrat as another tall target for comparison certainly didn't help. On top of that —

"Watcha lookin' at, hm?"

"Ah!" Receiving a surprise hug from behind, Kutori let out an odd sounding scream. "Hey, don't do that!"

"Haha, sorry sorry. You haven't moved an inch for a while, so I couldn't help myself."

"What kind of reason is that…"

Batting away the arms entangled around her neck, she turned to see Aiseia standing there with her usual smile.

Aiseia Myse Valgalis is also a fairy. At

fourteen years old, she is, like Kutori, considered a fully grown fairy soldier and has also had her compatibility with Dug Weapons confirmed. Also like Kutori, her last name, Valgalis, signifies her sword. She had hair colored like a ripe ear of rice and slightly slanted tree brown eyes. Her face always showed a warm, friendly smile.

"He's a popular guy... it's almost as if he's been living here for years. Did ya know? The ball game they're playing right now... he taught them it apparently. A lot of people can play at once, and even the kids bad at sports can get a little action."

"Hmm... I see."

"You're curious aren't ya? About him."

"Well..."

Anyone in this warehouse would rightfully be curious about Willem. Wherever he went, he stood out.

“Your new hat.”

The sudden change of topic surprised the lost in thought Kutori, who almost fell out of her chair.

“You’re taking pretty good care of it, aren’t ya? You stuffed it in your closet and never used it since, keeping it nice and clean.”

“I-It’s not like that means anything! That hat’s only useful as a disguise for when I leave the island... I don’t need it when I’m here! Besides, why are you even bringing that up now?!”

“Hmm?” Aiseia looked at Kutori with a broad grin across her face.

“What?!”

“Nothing, nothing. It’s just, you know, your reaction says a lot.”

“What are you talking about? Anyone

would act like that if they were surprised."

"Are you sure about that?"

As Aiseia continued her interrogation, a rolled up piece of paper suddenly struck her head.

"Please be quiet in the reading room."

Nephren Ruq Insania stood there with her usual expressionless face. She is, of course, another fairy, but unlike the other two, Nephren is only thirteen years old and won't be a fully grown fairy soldier until summer of this year. Her compatibility with Dug Weapons was only just recently confirmed. She had faded gray hair and charcoal black eyes. Her height was low even compared to other fairies, to the point that she might be buried if caught in a crowd of the little ones. She wore her signature expressionless face around the clock. Kutori had never even seen her smiling face or angry face.

Looking around, Kutori noticed that the three of them gathered by the window were the only ones present in the reading room.

“S-Sorry…”

Nephren took a seat next to the apologizing Kutori. “So, what kind of person is he?”

“I thought you said to be quiet…”

“It’s okay as long as we keep our voices down.”

“So it’s fine to keep talking, huh? … are you interested in him too, Ren?”

“Not really.” She glanced outside the window. “I just thought he was kind of a mysterious person.”

Kutori felt a little relieved that it wasn’t just her who saw Willem that way. If he was just simply a nice and cheerful person, they

wouldn't be so curious about him. He acted so close with the girls, yet at the same time seemed to draw a line between them. He looked to be having so much fun, yet also seemed a little lonely. He blended in so well to life in the warehouse, yet occasionally had a faraway look in his eyes, as if running through memories of a distant place. So Kutori's eyes were drawn to him. She couldn't help but wonder about him.

"... Kutori, how many days are left?"

Despite the ambiguous question, she knew exactly what Aiseia was asking about. She used the calendar in her room to keep track, so of course she had the answer memorized.

"Ten days."

"Hmm... I don't know if that'll be enough or not..."

“What are you guys talking about?”

“Whether or not we have time to fulfill Kutori’s dreams of love, of course!”

Kutori crashed her head into the table in shock.

“Kutori, be quiet in the reading room.”

“S-Sorry — no, not sorry! What are you saying all of a sudden, Aiseia?!”

“Ahaha, no need to be shy. A lot of fairies don’t even make it to puberty, so you’re lucky you can even experience love, ya know?”

“I-It’s not like I was looking at him in *that* kind of way.”

“… I see. I’ll go look for some stories with interracial marriage. They might be useful.”

“Ren!? I don’t need those!”

“Kutori, be quiet in the reading room.”

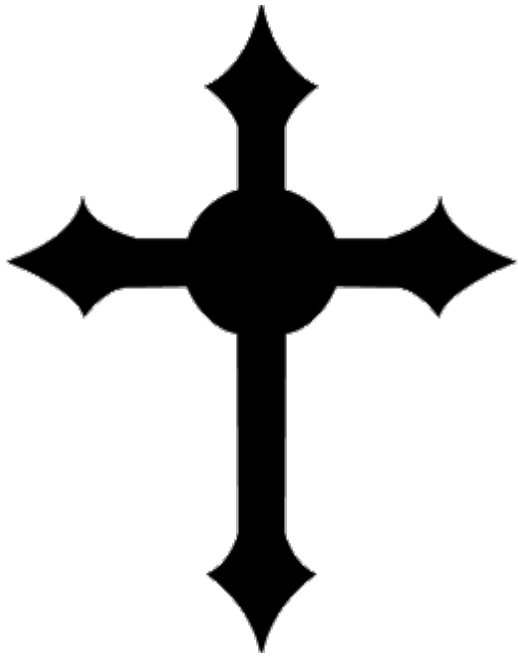
“Who do you think’s making me shout!?”

She took a moment to calm down. Outside, the ball, thrown up high in the air by someone, fell back down, drawing out a wide arc in the sky as it went.

“... I really don’t need anything, so please stop. I was finally able to give up on a lot of things... wouldn’t want to have any more regrets at this point.” Kutori spoke in a soft, barely audible voice.

“I see.” Aiseia let out one last sorrowful laugh, then turned her gaze outside without saying anything more.

Nephren nodded slightly, then, without a word, went back to reading the book in her hands.



One week later.

Willem had begun to get an uneasy feeling about his new job again. As he walked down the hallway trying to pinpoint exactly what felt out of place, a loud pitter patter sound closed in from behind.

“Willem!!”

Two legs pierced into his back, their force amplified by a well executed running jump. Despite the large difference in body

size and weight, the beautifully formed attack almost made Willem fall flat on his face. Before he had time to fully recover, small arms wrapped around his neck in a skillful joint locking technique.

“Got him!!”

“Ahh!! No, no! That’s not what I meant by ‘get him’!”

“The end justifies the means.”

“True, as long as he can’t escape there’s no problem.”

“There’s a big problem!! We’re the ones asking him for a favor.”

“Displaying a show of force before making a request is a basic strategy.”

“That’s something people who are about to kill each other do!”

“Kill! Kill! Kill!”

“That’s not a word you’re supposed to excitedly repeat!!”

His shoulder being twisted in pleasant directions with pleasant grinding noises, Willem took stock of the situation. The usual energetic little critters surrounded him.

“What’s up, guys? You need something?”

“Yes, yes. We have some business with you.”

“We want to read a book, so come!”

“I-I-I told you, no joint locks when asking for a favor!”

Willem agreed completely with this last girl.

“You want me to help you read a hard book? Sorry, but I’m not the greatest at reading and writing, you know.”

“Eh? You’re a technician, aren’t you? Aren’t you supposed to be smart?”

“Oh, I’m super smart. If you have any ancient literature from 500 years ago, I can read it no problem!”

The girls laughed at what they took to be a joke and pulled on Willem’s sleeves.

“We can read it ourselves. All we want you to do is sit beside us.”

“Yeah, it’s a story from long ago, so with just us it’s scary.”

“Well *I’m* not really scared or anything, but these kids insisted.”

“H-Hey, don’t act all grown up!”

Like always, the girls ran their mouths freely while managing to work together to drag Willem off somewhere.

“A story from long ago?”

“A story about the Emnetwyte!”

Willem suddenly felt a little dizzy at the mention of that name. A strong sense of deja vu overcame him, and his mind started to dive back into the past. The scenery around him, the warehouse on the 68th Island, twisted into the image of an old orphanage. Sights of the place where he once lived then evoked memories of him, the oldest of the children being raised there, taking care of the young ones.

Willemmm!!

Father, did you mess something up again?

Voices that Willem had tried so hard not to remember replayed in his head. He realized that he had forgotten something important: why he decided to stay on that filthy 28th Island. It was uncomfortable there. Hard to live. No one accepted him, who bore the obvious defect of being a markless. No one gave him a place he could

call home.

But those reasons were exactly why he stayed there. He no longer belonged anywhere. Even if he wished to return home, that wish would never come true. On that dumpster of an island, he never forgot that fact. He was reminded of the ugly truth every day.

But this place looked too similar. He had to constantly tell himself that this was not home. He shouldn't be wearing this unfitting black army uniform. The rank badge on his shoulder was meaningless. He wouldn't be here for more than a few months. So everything would be fine. He hadn't forgotten about or betrayed that place.

"Willem?"

A voice brought him back to the present.

"Ah, I'm fine. Just didn't get enough sleep

last night. So what's this Emnetwyte story about?"

"A looong time ago, they were there! Down on the ground!"

The girls all started frantically talking. In a picture book they read before, it said that terrifying creatures known as Emnetwyte populated the land. And because of them, the Orcs were forced into small patches of poor land, the Elves' precious forests burned, the Reptrace were driven out of their water holes, the Lucantrobos' peace was disrupted, the Dragons had their treasure plundered. And when the Visitors descended anew to bestow divine punishment upon them, the Emnetwyte struck first, slaying the gods themselves. In the end, they called the '17 Beasts' out from somewhere and self destructed, taking everything else on the ground along with them.

“Scary, isn’t it?”

When told like that, the story certainly was frightening. It made you wonder how the Emnetwyte could have been such heinous monsters.

“Well, it’s a picture book, so it might not be true you know?”

“But it says it’s a true story.”

“Everything says that.”

The girls looked at each other.

“But then, are the Braves from the story also not real?”

“I wouldn’t want that,” mumbled the purple haired girl. The others nodded in agreement.

“I guess there might be some true things mixed in… why would it be bad if the Braves didn’t exist?”

For a second time, the girls all looked at each other.

“Because… we’re also Braves?”

Willem didn’t quite understand. They feared the Emnetwyte, yet at the same time wanted to become the very symbol of the race itself. Well, it’s true that to humanity at the time, the Braves were like a type of weapon. Maybe that’s why the girls, being weapons themselves, felt some sense of closeness to those ancient warriors.

“By the way, um… Mr. Willem.” One of the girls timidly addressed him. “Doesn’t that hurt?”

Upon hearing the question, the pain in his shoulder suddenly returned, unpleasantly reminding him that he had never left the joint lock.

3 The Fairy Warehouse

Kutori never liked her very much. She always called Kutori her little sister and treated her as such. Of course, fairies, who aren't born from the womb of any mother, can't actually have sisters or siblings of any sort. But she would justify their supposed older and younger sister relationship by saying that they originated in the same forest on the same floating island, or that she came five years earlier than Kutori. Pulling out those coincidental facts as evidence only annoyed Kutori more.

She also apparently had great skill with Dug Weapons, another point that Kutori didn't like. Kutori remembered watching her fly off to battle, showing off her big sword, then come marching home with a wide grin on her face. Right after coming

back, she would always barge into the dining hall and chow down on butter cake, an item on the menu at that time, with an expression of pure bliss.

One time, on a whim, the then young and inexperienced Kutori decided to ask her something.

“Why do you always wear that brooch, even though it doesn’t look good on you?”

“Ahaha you’re too honest, Kutori. You’ll make your big sister cry, you know?”

“You’re not my big sister…”

“Ehh? Well I certainly can’t be the little sister.”

“I’m saying we’re not sisters in the first place.”

After a few minutes of their usual light hearted banter, she loosened her smile a bit.

“I once had someone like a big sister too. I took this brooch from them.”

“Took it? She didn’t give it to you?”

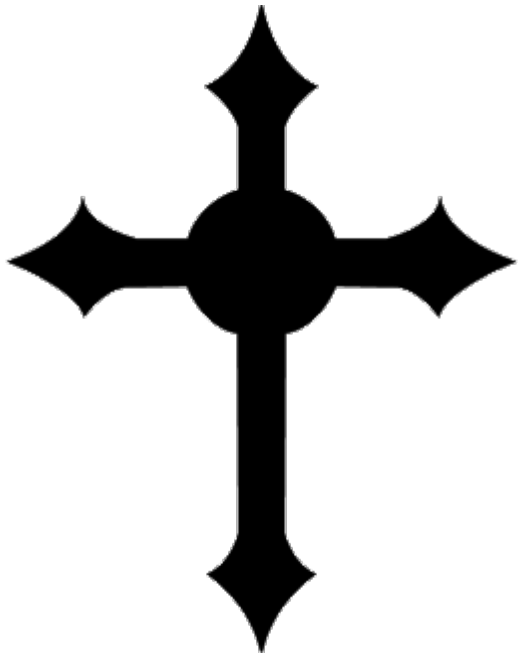
“It was one of her treasures. She always wore it and took good care of it, so whenever I asked for it she wouldn’t listen.” At this point Kutori thought she was even more evil than before, stealing such an important item from someone, but like always she laughed away Kutori’s judgmental stares. “I would challenge her to various games, demanding the brooch if I won. Like grades in our training courses, or eating contests, or card games. But I never won. Even so, I kept challenging her because it was fun.”

Kutori could already see how the story would end. If Kutori didn’t know this self proclaimed big sister’s big sister, it meant that she had already gone by the time Kutori came around. Kutori remained

silent, not wanting to ask about that, but it must have showed on her face.

The 'big sister' patted her back and went on. "Well in the end, I won by default. One day, she went off to battle without her brooch on. She had just left it on the desk in her room, so it became mine." She laughed, even though Kutori couldn't see anything funny about her story. "I think it looks bad on me too... but I feel like I need to wear it."

Again, Kutori never liked her very much. But, looking back, maybe she wasn't so bad after all. So that day when she never returned home from battle, Kutori went to her room. Behind the unlocked door lay a mess of underwear, card games, and other miscellaneous items strewn about. Amidst the clutter, only the top of her desk was clean. A silver brooch sat all alone right in the middle.



For the past few days, Willem hadn't seen some of the fairies around. Kutori, Aiseia, and Nephren. All of the relatively old girls seemed to have disappeared somewhere. After thinking about it for a little, he figured that there must have been some special circumstances and decided to not pursue the matter any further. Without any more thought, he simply accepted the situation.

The ground still retained some moisture

from the morning's rain. Team red, which had struggled throughout the first half of the game, had just begun to get back on the offensive. The team members' motivation was on the rise, and they all agreed to smash the ball right into the white team captain's face during the second half.

A strong wind suddenly blew while the ball flew through the air, guiding it right into a dense thicket. The girl chasing it happened to be the type to never give up and the type who doesn't pay attention to her feet when looking at the sky. Adding up those conditions left only one possible outcome. Determined to catch her target, the girl ended up falling head first into the thick brush.

"Hey! Are you alright!?"

"Ow ow... that was a failure."

The crash looked bad enough that a serious injury wouldn't be surprising, so

when the girl stood up laughing, Willem breathed a sigh of relief. Then, a moment later, he froze in terror. A deep laceration showed on the girl's left thigh, and her upper right arm had been pierced by a thin branch. Fortunately, judging by the amount of blood coming out, an artery hadn't been damaged, but it was still hardly the light scratch that the girl made it seem like.

"Both look pretty bad. We're going to treat these right away."

"Ehh? I'm fineee," the girl responded nonchalantly. "Anyways, let's play let's play! We're about to make a comeback!"

Willem couldn't believe his ears. Maybe the wounds weren't as serious as they looked? But no matter how many times he checked, he could be certain that they needed to be healed immediately, or else the girl's life might be in danger.

"... it doesn't hurt?"

"It hurts. But, you know, we were just getting all fired up!" The girl, a huge smile on her face, excitedly gestured for Willem to restart the game.

He finally began to understand the situation. Like she said, there was actually pain, and maybe a lot of it. This girl — and the other girls, who didn't seem to detect anything unnatural about her behavior — simply didn't think of injuries as a big deal. A shiver ran through his spine. He felt as if he was surrounded by unknown, mysterious creatures. Or perhaps it wasn't just a feeling at all, but rather the reality that he had failed to notice until now.

"The game's over."

Groans rose up from the girls in protest, but Willem, paying them no attention, rushed inside the warehouse, carrying the wounded girl in his arms.

"... so why is the depressed one here not the actual person that got injured, but the one who just carried her?" Wearing a white gown over her normal clothes, Naigrat questioned Willem.

The girl lay on a nearby bed with her limbs wrapped in bandages, pouting over the ball game's suspension. Willem sat in a chair, his head buried in his hands.

"I didn't notice until today... those girls don't seem to have much attachment to their own lives, do they?" Holding that posture, he asked Naigrat, who he hoped might know something.

"Hmm, I guess. They certainly do have that tendency."

"That's not normal... what are they, anyway?"

Naigrat paused for a moment and sighed, then asked back, "Do you really want to

know that?"

Willem finally looked up.

"You are their manager, even though it may be just a title. So if you demand information about them, then I am in no position to refuse." Her voice took a more serious tone. "To be honest, I don't really want to tell you. After hearing this, you'll change your attitude toward the kids. At first, I thought you were a bit creepy, but now I'm thankful that you've been so nice to them. If possible, I want things to stay like this for a little longer."

"... tell me please."

"Well then... I guess I have no choice." Naigrat's shoulders sagged. "Strictly speaking, those kids are not living. Their bodies do not fear death because they are not alive in the first place. Their minds are different, but at a young age they just follow their body's instincts and easily

become careless."

"Sorry... I don't understand a word you're saying."

Not living? What kind of joke is that? How could the stubborn, energetic, boisterous girls he saw everyday be... not living?

"Hmm... well I didn't want to believe it either when I first heard," Naigrat murmured softly. She walked out of the room and gestured to Willem. "Follow me. I want to show you something."

Willem sluggishly stood up and went after her, still utterly perplexed.

"The Emnetwyte. I assume you know a lot about them?"

"... as much as anyone does."

"No need to be modest." She giggled. "The legendary species that ruled the ground over five hundred years ago. They

weren't blessed with any special talents…"

It is said that the Emnetwyte lacked the daunting size of the Gigants. They had no refined magic like the Elves. Their building skills paled in comparison to that of the Moleians. Their reproduction rate could never match that of the Orcs. And of course, they also lacked the overwhelming strength of the Dragons. Despite being a puny existence with no superior abilities, the Emnetwyte ruled the ground for a long period of time, fending off attacks from almost all of the other races.

"Ah… I see."

"And one more thing: they tasted way more delicious than any of the other races. That fact has been passed down through generations of Trolls."

That legend needs to die out. Seriously.

"One of the main reasons for their

strength was the system of weapons which now lives on under the name of Dug Weapons."

"... I've heard of those before. Anaala mentioned once that if you find a functioning Dug Weapon, it'll easily cover the cost of the next few salvages."

"Mhm. The Trading Company buys them for a minimum of 200,000 Bradals. I think the highest has been 8,000,000 Bradals."

Eight million. That could pay off Willem's sizable debt fifty times and still leave some left over.

"And... all the Dug Weapons gathered by the Trading Company..."

Naigrat stopped walking as they arrived in front of an unusually large and sturdy door. A thick layer of metal covered its entirety, with sharp tacks protruding from

the edges. The locking system looked to be more intricate than any ordinary keyhole, and the accompanying doorknob felt incredibly heavy. In this "warehouse" overflowing with liveliness, the out of place door in front of them alone served as a reminder of its official status as an army facility.

"... are inside this room."

Naigrat unlocked the door with ease and pushed it open. A deep sound like the rumbling of a stomach resounded throughout the hallway. Mold and dust mixed together to form an unpleasant. damp smell which found its way into Willem's nose.

It's almost like a tomb. It looked like one of those where an ancient king was buried with his treasures, and foolish tomb robbers would try to steal some but end up being cursed. Willem had never actually

seen one with his own eyes, but he heard a few stories like that. Well, whether or not such tombs still remained down there on the ground, he had no idea.

The room had no lights. He could tell that something lay there behind the darkness, but couldn't make out what.

"Pretty strict security, huh?"

"Well, a bunch of dangerous things are gathered here."

The pair stood still, waiting for their eyes to get used to the gloom.

"Weapons of the ancient past whose ways of making, repairing, and wielding have all been lost forever. Weapons made by a powerless race to defeat the all-powerful Dragons and Visitors. Weapons that symbolized the will to resist and the strength to fight. Weapons that, despite being held by mere individuals, could

change the outcome of an entire war."

The shadowy contents of the room started to become discernible.

"Haha…." Willem laughed nervously.

Against one wall leaned dozens of swords. Although he still couldn't see them clearly, they were obviously much larger than a typical longsword used only for ceremonial purposes or personal combat. Their lengths varied, but most stretched up to the height of an average adult, or slightly less. The proportional lengths of the hilts indicated that the swords were meant to be wielded with both hands.

What made them clearly different from regular swords was the structure of their blades. As Willem observed them from a closer distance, he could make out the signature cracks running throughout their bodies. An even more careful look would reveal that the parts of the blade on either

side of one of these cracks differed slightly in color, suggesting that the cracks were not cracks at all, but rather links.

A normal sword comes from a single lump of metal beaten into shape. But these came from dozens of steel fragments, all about the size of a fist, linked together in a sword shaped jigsaw puzzle.

“Kaliyons…”

“So that’s what they used to be called, huh?”

As Willem looked around the room once more, he felt a sudden tight pain in his chest. He recognized some of the swords. The Percival Series mass produced Kaliyons. Those swords had taken good care of him many a time when he was still a rookie Quasi Brave without a specialized weapon. They had no individualized Talents built in, but made up for it with a reasonably high base quality and incredible

flexibility — Willem could perform emergency maintenance on his sword even in the middle of a battlefield. He could never get used to the successor model, the Dindrane Series, but it got praise from other Quasi Braves for its improved stability.

Locus Solus. The favorite sword of a Quasi Brave, whose name he couldn't remember, that fought alongside Willem during a battle with the Dragons in the south. It had a Talent for muscle stimulation, but since its healing abilities broke, your muscles would always hurt like hell the day after a battle — Willem remembered his comrade complaining about that.

Beside it sat Mulusmaurea. A fellow Quasi Brave had carried it into battle when they were called as reinforcements to defend the city of Listiru. He never got a chance to see its Talents in action, but he

heard it had the ability to prevent death for a short time.

"Heh..."

It felt like a very strange class reunion. He plopped himself on the ground, not caring if his army uniform got dirty. Lightly igniting his Venom, Willem concentrated and gave his eyes the ability to see spell veins, ignoring the resultant pain in his head. As he expected, all of the swords were in poor condition. The spell lines had been untied and cut and scrambled every which way.

Even with these shoddy swords, they still keep fighting?

"There's one thing I want to ask you."

"What is it?"

"Kaliyons were created for the Emnetwyte by the Emnetwyte, man-made

miracles. Only the chosen Braves of that same race could wield them. Now, they should be nothing more than useless antiques. So why still gather them? How do you fight with them?"

"You already know the answer to that, don't you?"

Because... we're also Braves?

Ignoring the little girl's voice replaying in his head, Willem asked again. "Tell me."

"If the Emnetwyte aren't around any more, we just need a substitute. Those kids are Leprechauns. The sole race that can act as a complete replacement for the Emnetwyte. There's the answer you've been looking for."

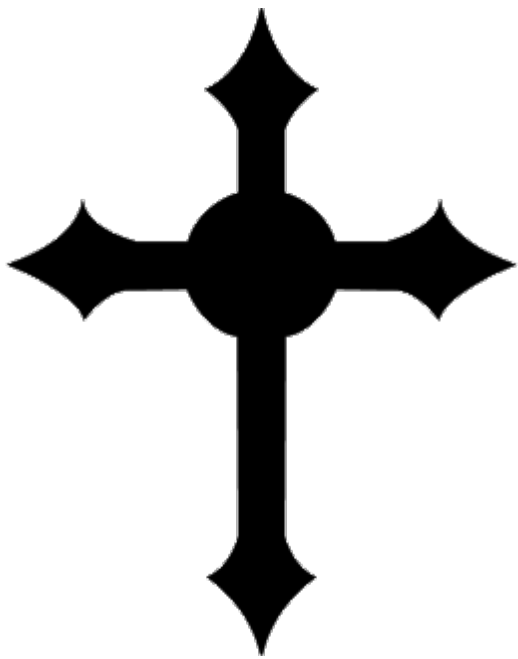
"... I see."

Deep down inside, Willem had already figured that out. He stood up, brushed the

dust off his bottom, and passed his gaze over the lined up Kaliyons.

“So those girls are you guys’ partners now, huh?”

With a tinge of loneliness, pride, and sorrow, as if speaking to his old friends, Willem muttered those words.



What am I? Willem thought to himself. A few descriptions came to mind. One who once aspired to be a Regular Brave. One

who once wielded a Kaliyon as a Quasi Brave. And lastly, one who lost those qualifications in a battle and now lived like an empty shell.

To become a Regular Brave, one needed a suitable background. For example, you had the blood of a god in you. Or you were the descendant of a Brave. Or you were born on a special night mentioned in some prophecy. Or your hometown had been destroyed by Dragons. Or your father had passed down secret sword techniques to you. Or your body had a powerful demon sealed inside of it. All of the real deal Braves had some background like that. Only those that everyone agreed would be able to handle inhuman strength could actually have the opportunity to grasp it.

So Willem couldn't become a Regular Brave. No matter how much he wanted to, he simply didn't meet the qualifications. His birth parents lived simple lives working

in the cotton business. He grew up in a regular old orphanage, not particularly happy but not particularly miserable either. Naturally, such an ordinary background could only earn him ordinary strength. He could do absolutely nothing about that. It would have been nice if he was at least born in the neighborhood of an esoteric school of swordcraft or something, but unfortunately the world didn't seem to cater to Willem's circumstances.

"You have no talent." One time, his master flat out told him that. "The system of Braves is fundamentally elite. Legendary heroes... those born with the blood of a demigod... the system was created to give those kinds of people the ability to unlock even greater power. They live in a completely different world than us simple warriors who strive for victories on a much smaller scale. They carry the whole world on their backs."

The master shook his head. “Any normal human wouldn’t be able to fulfill that purpose. Even if you forced yourself, you would soon break… then not being able to fight would be the least of your worries. And Willem, unfortunately, you are a somewhat normal human.”

A brief silence followed. The master took a deep breath and gave the last of his speech. “Don’t make that face… it’s not like I enjoy crushing your dreams. This is simply the truth that I must tell you and the reality that you must face. That’s all.”

When he heard those words, Willem denied them. He continued stubbornly refusing to give up. Looking back, it might have been a childish reaction. But at the time, he was dead serious. He chose to defy his master’s words until the bitter end.

Willem remembered the 20th generation Regular Brave appointed by the Church.

He not only carried blood of the first Regular Brave, but also had been born heir to some kingdom. When he was just nine years old, an army of Gloom Elves attacked that kingdom, burning everything he held dear to ashes: his parents, his friends, his hometown. While his castle crumbled in flames, he escaped to a faraway remote village, where he studied long lost sword techniques under an old army general.

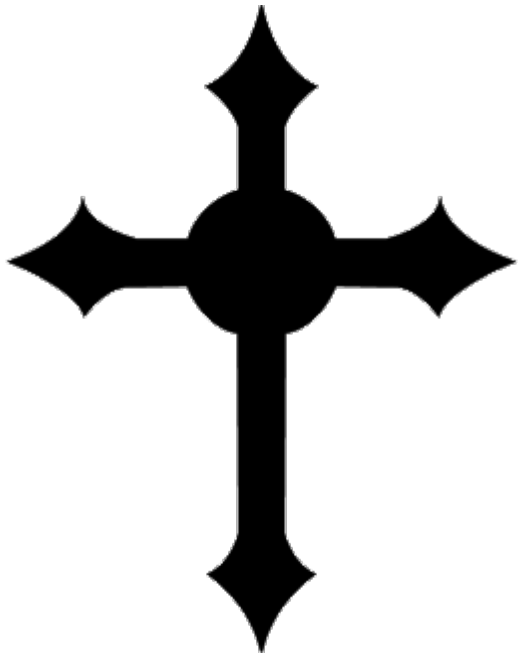
When Willem first heard about the guy's history, he could hardly do anything but sigh. Finally seeing proof of what it took to become a Regular Brave hurt a bit. When that new appointee received the 18th Regular Brave's beloved sword, Seniolis, one of the five highest tier holy swords in the entire world, he couldn't bring himself to feel any jealousy or hatred. He had already given up thinking about it. It was all in a whole different world from his. Comparing himself to that could only make him more miserable.

A long time afterwards, Willem realized. That person had a reason he could fight. He had a reason to fight. He had a reason why he must fight. That's why everyone, including Willem, didn't notice. No one even imagined the possibility.

Him. The 20th generation Regular Brave. Born with the strength to defeat the mightiest of demons, bearing the pain of losing his parents and hometown, carrying on secret techniques of the ancient past, wielding a shining sword capable of fighting even the Visitors. Him.

He had never once wished to fight. He simply threw himself into a war of revenge because he had no other choice. He challenged the Dragons and the gods themselves because he had to meet the expectations of others. He was nothing but a puppet manipulated by his own powers and the desires of those who could use him.

The moment Willem realized that, he began to hate him. He could never forgive him. And, to be perfectly honest, he still carried some of those feelings even now.



As the sun sank below the horizon, a light rain began to pour.

“Shoulda brought an umbrella…” he muttered softly, but he didn’t actually feel like taking shelter or heading back to his room.

The 68th Island, harbor district. The foyer of the entire island, it contained all the necessary facilities for airship landing and departure. He stood out in the open near the edge of the harbor, leaving himself vulnerable to the falling rain drops. A few clouds shaped like shredded cotton floated about beneath him. And even farther beyond those, he saw the great expanse of land spreading out in all directions. It contained no trace of the green of the forests, or the blue of the rivers and oceans, or the yellow of deserts. The view before his eyes contained only a sea of uncanny, muddy gray sand.

He had come to the harbor for the sole purpose of seeing that view. He wanted to confirm the things he had lost, the things he could never take back. But before long, even that gray wasteland began to melt into the absolute darkness of night.

There were a few things he could agree

with. For example, that usage of Venom. Venom is a little like heat, or a flame. You first ignite a spark within your body, feed the fire, then transfer its power outside. But this heat places a burden on the user's body. If you try to summon a flame beyond a certain strength, your own life force will smother it. This mechanism places an inherent upper limit on the amount of Venom the different races can wield.

So if there existed some twisted life form whose body was not strictly living, it would be able to produce an enormous amount of Venom far beyond what the other races could hope to achieve. That power, which would most likely be uncontrollable, would soon run wild and cause a gigantic explosion, blowing away the user and his enemy, leaving behind only a gaping hole with a lone Kaliyon at its center. The ultimate weapon. It might not be the most efficient, given its one time use nature, but

just having that as an option carries significant meaning and value.

One more thing he could agree with: they were certainly strong. A race bred for war. Their entire lives spent for the sole purpose of victory. Carrying that fate alone made those girls worthy. Worthy of being the successors to the Regular Braves. They could become the thing that Willem had strived so hard to become but could not. Great. Wonderful. They probably wanted that too. In that case, he should be happy for them. He should bless them. Woohoo, awesome! I'll leave all the rest to you! Good luck!

"... I want to die..."

Of course, Willem knew. His deeply flawed logic had been created by his own mind in a desperate attempt to comfort himself. Standing here all alone, his thoughts had run wild. Maybe it would be

better to talk to the girls directly about how he felt. But in the end, what could he do? An irrelevant outsider has no right to interfere in the wars of Braves.

"– hm?"

Above his head, rays of sunshine shone brightly, parting the thick sea of clouds. An airship approached. He couldn't make out the silhouette very well against the blinding light behind it, but he knew for certain that it was no ordinary patrol airship or ferryman's ship. It seemed rather small, but most likely it was an army transport ship.

A deep metal grinding sound resounded through the damp air as the airship docked in the harbor. Screeches erupted from the shock absorber boards. Three anchors fastened the back, middle, and front of the ship to the pier. The pair of rotors stopped their movements. The burning spell reactor gradually shut down, lowering the

deafening thundering noise it had been making.

The ship's main entrance door opened, revealing two human figures stepping out from within.

"You guys..."

Willem immediately recognized the two as Leprechauns: Kutori and Aiseia. They both wore an informal women's army uniform, an outfit he hadn't seen them in before. Something was off. Aiseia, with a grim look on her face, walked with a limp Kutori leaning against her shoulder.

"Hey hey, Willem, Second Enchanted Weapons Technician. Good evenin'." She spoke in her usual cheerful manner. "Sure is a strange place to meet, huh? Taking a walk in the rain?"

Aiseia probably meant it as a joke, or an intentionally wrong guess, in an attempt to

keep the topic off their own situation. But it was pretty much the right answer. Well, not that it mattered. Willem wasn't about to let them avoid the subject.

"What happened to you guys?"

"Hmm... well we were in a similar situation as yours. Just taking a little walk outside the island... will you accept that as an explanation?"

"Of course not. I assume this is...." He faltered. Whether or not it was acceptable to ask any further, he couldn't tell, but he needed to. "You just came back from fighting, didn't you? With the '17 Beasts'."

"Ahaha, how'd you know?"

Kutori hadn't said a word since getting off the airship. Wanting to see how badly she had been hurt, Willem walked up closer to her.

“Ah — she’s fine. There’s nothing you can do for her. If you want to help out, maybe you can handle that over there.”

With her eyes, Aiseia indicated the mountain standing behind them. Milky white scales covered the mountain’s entire body, over which it wore an army uniform. Crouching down to squeeze through the door, it began to sluggishly exit the airship. Near the mountain’s summit, a pair of eyes opened and locked onto Willem.

— it was the Reptrace Willem saw that one time.

“That uniform… I take it you are Willem?” He had an intimidating voice, like the hissing of a snake. Due to their different throat structures, the Reptrace always had peculiar pronunciation, even when speaking the common tongue of the islands.

“Yeah… and you are?”

“Carry,” the Reptrace commanded, completely ignoring Willem’s question, and handed him, or rather threw at him, two long, thin objects.

Instinctively, Willem reached out his arms to catch. But the package, which wasn’t that large compared to the gigantic Reptrace’s body, almost surpassed Willem’s size. Likewise, while the Reptrace had been able to effortlessly hold it and toss it around, it was far too heavy for any normal human’s muscles. He failed to grab them and the objects fell on the ground, making clanging metal sounds.

“These are…”

Wrapped tightly in white cloth were two supersized swords.

“The weapons of these two. Carry them back to storage.” The Reptrace repeated his order and started to head back inside the airship.

“H-Hey!”

“You don’t have the right to say anything. In a place where a warrior stands, one who is not a warrior cannot enter.”

With that, the door closed shut, concealing the Reptrace’s boulder like back.

“Ah, don’t worry about him. Mr. Lizard’s always like that,” Aiseia said cheerfully. “Also, if you could carry those swords, that would be super. As you can see, I’ve got my hands full with Kutori.”

“Was she wounded?”

“Nope, she just overexerted herself, so she’s feeling a little faint. After some rest in the clinic, she’ll be good as new.”

“I see.”

Willem picked up one of the swords lying at his feet. Even through the thick

cloth wrapping, he could feel its familiar texture. And even with the scarce lighting, he could recognize its unmistakable shape.

“Seniolis…”

“Ohh, you sure know your swords.”

Of course he knew. Not a single Quasi Brave alive during that time didn’t know that name. Swing it to the right and slay a dragon. Swing to the left and bring down a god. One of the very first Kaliyons ever forged. The Brown Dragon Killer. The God Breaker. The Secret Blade of the White Scabbard. It had accumulated enough nicknames from its long history and many achievements to make a book. A Kaliyon among Kaliyons. The partner of the 18th and 20th generation Regular Braves, a symbol of heroism.

“Is this yours?”

“Nah, that’s Kutori’s. I’m assigned to the

other one."

Willem picked up the second sword.

"Valgalis."

"Mhmm. Seems like you've become pretty knowledgeable. Did ya read our equipment list or somethin'?"

"No…." He shook his head. "Just happen to know a lot of these swords."

"Ah, not really sure what you mean by that, but okay," Aiseia said, tilting her head.

"I'll take that luggage too."

"Huh? Wait…"

Willem picked up the limp Kutori and carried her on his back. Behind them, a shrill metallic sound signaled the departure of the airship from the harbor.

"… you're stronger than I thought,"

muttered Aiseia, who now had nothing to carry.

“Well, it’s my job to support you guys now.”

“Ohh, trying to sound cool, huh?”

Willem started the long walk back, with Aiseia following half a step behind.

“So how much do you know? About us.”

“... not much. I know that you’re fairies... and you’re fighting to protect the islands with Kaliyons... or rather Dug Weapons. That’s about it.”

“Hmm... I see.” Aiseia looked up at the sky. “Repulsive, isn’t it? Disposable lives. Using relics of the despised Emnetwyte. A pretty disgusting setting if you ask me.”

“Don’t say setting... you’re not some character in a story.”

But she was completely right. That perfect setting she spoke of was essentially all a Brave needed. The more sorrowful, the more tragic, the better. Their fates and destinies all revolved around that setting, which would instill in them the power to wield the ancient artifacts of the Emnetwyte. It didn't matter if they themselves wished for it or not.

"A long time ago... I knew someone in a situation similar to you guys'."

"Ooh, an old story?"

"It's not long enough to be a story. I owed her a lot, and I never got a chance to repay all the things she did. So when I heard about you guys, I felt like I had to do something to help. That's all."

"Wow... it really was short."

"I told you..."

Aiseia kicked a stone lying on the road with a bored look on her face.

“Hmm.. is this the part where you open up your heart to me and try to build up our love? Since it’s just the two of us and all.”

“Aren’t you forgetting a certain someone on my back?”

“Kutori’s the one that wakes up in the middle and hears everything, ya know? Then a wonderful, jealousy filled love triangle is born.”

“What in the world have you been reading lately?”

“The Torn Triangle.”

Willem had heard the title before. It took place on a fictional floating island, where the characters repeatedly engaged in cheating and adultery, claiming they were searching for true love.

Well, stuck in this forest almost their whole lives with just other girls (and Naigrat), they had to learn about society somehow. Apparently, they gathered information from sources such as these, which were a little inaccurate, to say the least.

“I especially like the third book. It’s a masterpiece.”

“Remind me to confiscate that when we get back. Kids shouldn’t be reading that kind of book.”

“Such oppression! Who ya calling kids, huh?? Also, you knew everything just from the title?!”

Many forms of entertainment and pleasure flowed through the slightly degenerate 28th Island. Going around from job to job, Willem heard gossip about all the latest crazes. Anyway, he decided to ignore all of Aiseia’s questions.

“Keep your voice down… this one’ll wake up.”

He felt his back shake slightly, accompanied by a small groan.

4 The Brave One and the Successors

What am I? Willem thought to himself. No longer a Brave, he had no reason to protect this new world nor did he have the power to do that anyway. So right now, his only purpose in life was to be this fake weapons manager, an empty position with no responsibilities other than to simply be present. He could disappear at anytime. No one would notice or care or be hurt. He had become a ghost.

— Ten minutes later, in the clinic.

“Why are you here?”

That was the first thing that came out of Kutori’s mouth after she regained consciousness.

“Is there something wrong with staying

beside a sick person?"

"I'm not sick," she snapped with an unpleasant look on her face, although Willem could see her faintly blushing.

"Did you know? The ancient Braves that you guys are imitating had many special illnesses that, if caught during a mission, needed to be treated right away. At the very top of that list was Acute Venom Poisoning, what you're suffering from right now."

"Sometimes, your jokes make no sense." Kutori looked away, still in a sour mood.

It definitely wasn't a joke, but if she won't believe it, then oh well.

"C'mon, face this way. I can't swap out the towel on your forehead like that."

"I don't need it."

"That's not something the patient decides. Come on."

“I’m fine. This is nothing. If I just rest a little it’ll go away.”

“Don’t be stupid.” He lightly touched her forehead. “You have to properly treat Venom Poisoning every time, or else it’ll become a regular thing. If you keep taking that attitude towards it, you’ll soon pass your limit.”

“Look at you, talking like you’re an expert.”

“I *am* an expert. Enchanted Weapons Technician is my job, after all.”

“Hmph.”

Kutori’s eyes turned the other way for a second time, as if saying, *what the heck is this guy talking about?* In the first place, Enchanted Weapons Technicians build and maintain spell powered machines used on the battlefield, just like their name implies. The rank of Second Technician carries

authority and responsibility equal to that of a superior military officer. And of course, a high amount of education, training, and experience is necessary to climb up to that position. But obviously, Willem didn't have any of that. The title that he bore, simply for show, carried absolutely no power with it — this was common knowledge among the fairies as well.

"I'm your manager. I think I have the right to be worried about you."

"It's not like... it doesn't matter if you're the manager or not, I don't need anyone worrying about me."

Kutori still refused to face Willem, so he couldn't see her expression. Although, judging from her bright red ears, her fever probably hadn't settled down yet.

"I don't even care about this 'limit' or whatever you're talking about. There's not

much time left anyways."

"Time? What do you mean?"

"Hey, I want to ask you something," Kutori responded, ignoring the question.

"What?"

"If... this is a hypothetical question, okay? If I were to die in five days, would you be a little nicer to me?"

Silence.

"... huh?" Willem failed to grasp what she meant.

"This is just a what if, so answer. Would you listen to my last wishes and stuff?"

"Wait. Where'd that five days come from? I need to know a little more about what's going on, or else I can't answer the question."

“Five days from now, on the 15th Floating Island. A Teimerre will attack.”

Another silence.

“The 17 Beasts cannot fly. That’s the only reason Regul Aire can go on floating. But the Teimerre, the 6th Beast, can carry out an attack while staying on the ground itself. It has two special abilities: splitting and rapid growth. The main body can stay on land and split off tens of thousands of little parts of itself, then send them flying in the wind. If one of those pieces happens to fall on a floating island, it can rapidly grow, reproduce, and the entire island will be destroyed in about six hours.”

Silence.

“Of course, Regul Aire has ways to fight it. Something with a presence as large as a Beast’s will definitely be detected by our alarm system before reaching an island. The more powerful the fragment, the

sooner we can sense it. That gives us just enough time to prepare defenses. And that's how Regul Aire has been deflecting Teimerre attacks for the past hundreds of years."

Silence.

"About half a year ago, an especially large fragment was detected. Going by predictions of its strength, all of the regular armed forces available at the landing site will not stand a chance against it. But, a fairy with a Dug Weapon, on the other hand..."

"... can defeat it in exchange for her life... is that right?"

"That's exactly right. Seniolis and I should be able to stop it with a self explosion attack. I guess we're lucky."

Kutori, hiding under the blankets, shrugged her shoulders. Only a single

sacrifice was needed. If they had been short even a little firepower, a second fairy would have been lost as well — most likely either Aiseia or Nephren.

"Remember, this is all a hypothetical situation." Slowly, she finally turned to face Willem, a playful smile spreading across face. But her eyes alone showed no signs of cheer. "Well? If that were to happen, would you listen to my last wishes?"

"... depends on what they are."

"Well... for example... ah...." Kutori fumbled for words. "... if I asked for a kiss or something. What would you do?"

Her too, huh?

Going by the worthless books the fairy girls liked to read, they had gotten to the part where Willem was supposed to be all flustered or feel really embarrassed or something, but he refused to play along. In

a voice that almost sounded like a groan, he responded, “You have five days to live, and *that’s* what you ask for?”

“I-Is that bad?”

Willem made a ring with the thumb and middle finger of his right hand. Then, putting a little strength into his middle finger, he flicked Kutori’s forehead.

“Ow!?”

“A kid shouldn’t be talking about such grown up things. It’s because all you read is romance novels.”

“N-No, I read a lot of other things too!”

It seems like she didn’t deny the accusation that she had been reading romance novels. Because of her fever, or maybe because she was actually getting agitated, the words coming out of her mouth started to sound less coherent. Also,

she didn't seem aware of it herself.

"A-Anyway, I wanted to make some memories… what's wrong with that?" She grasped a silver brooch tightly near her chest. "If you were going to die… you at least wouldn't want to disappear, right? You would want to be remembered by someone. To have a connection with someone." Slowly, but surely, tears began to well up in her eyes. "How could anything be wrong with that…"

"That's not what I'm saying. If anything's wrong, it's that you're being too hasty." Willem touched his hand gently to her forehead. Still hot. "I'm saying that you shouldn't be so desperate that you're willing to do that with anyone just for the sake of doing it. Rushing something like that never leads to anything good."

"It doesn't matter! It's not like I have time to worry–"

“Also, if you’re going to cry, let it all out while someone’s beside you. Crying by yourself is only for experienced masters that can tell when they’re going to stop crying. I can’t recommend it for beginners.”

“Shut up. If you’re not going to kiss me, be quiet. Also, I’m not crying.”

“I can tell from your voice, you know?”

“Not crying,” she insisted stubbornly once more.

— *What was I?* Willem thought to himself. He decided to reconfirm: the shell of a hero who had lost everything he wanted to protect. A shell, of course, does not have any wishes, for it is dead.

“… geez.” He scratched his head. “Lie on your stomach for a second.”

“Can’t hear anything.” Kutori plugged her ears with her fingers and faced the other

way.

“Come on, just do it.”

“Can’t hear.”

“Well, if you won’t listen…”

Willem grabbed Kutori’s shoulder and forcibly turned her around to face him again. Then, leaning in close, he lightly pressed his lips against her forehead.

“Heh?”

Kutori’s entire body stiffened, as if her brain had reflexively halted all activity in response to the shock. She couldn’t fully process what had just happened to her forehead. All she knew was that some surprise had caused her body to stop moving. The sensation that she should have felt on her forehead hardly reached her brain.

“Will you listen now? Lie face down.”

“Eh. Wait. What just happened?”

“Hurry up.”

Growing impatient, Willem again grabbed Kutori by the shoulder and turned her face down on the bed.

“Ahh!!?”

“I’m going to get rid of your fever. Just to be safe, keep your mouth closed.”

“M-mouth? Eh? What?”

He placed his hand gently on her back and checked the condition of her muscles and blood flow with his fingers. One characteristic symptom of Venom poisoning is the lowered functioning of body tissues that contain the built up Venom. The body’s immune system sometimes mistakes this for some kind of illness and creates a fever in response. A careful inspection can reveal the

problematic places where Venom might be lingering.

“Here… and here…”

“Agh!”

He gave a hard push with his fingertips.

During Willem’s long career as a Quasi Brave, it wasn’t too rare of an occurrence for himself or a comrade to suffer from Venom poisoning. When that happened in the middle of a battle, they needed a quick and easy way to lessen the symptoms as much as possible. Especially during long campaigns, preventing burn out from fighting carried significant importance, so one time he grabbed an army medic and learned this technique.

“Ow! It hurts there!”

“It’s because the leftover Venom is making your muscles all stiff. If I can undo

it, you'll feel better."

"Even though you say that, it still — ah! That tickl — ah!"

"Try to stay still."

"Like I said, it's not as easy as it — ah!"

The main trick was to press down on ten specific spots, situated symmetrically about the spine, in order. Restoration of a healthy blood flow helped wash away the stagnant Venom. To draw a comparison, the treatment gave a sensation similar to a muscle loosening massage. Actually, besides stimulating those specific acupuncture points beforehand, the two processes hardly differed at all.

"Ahhh..."

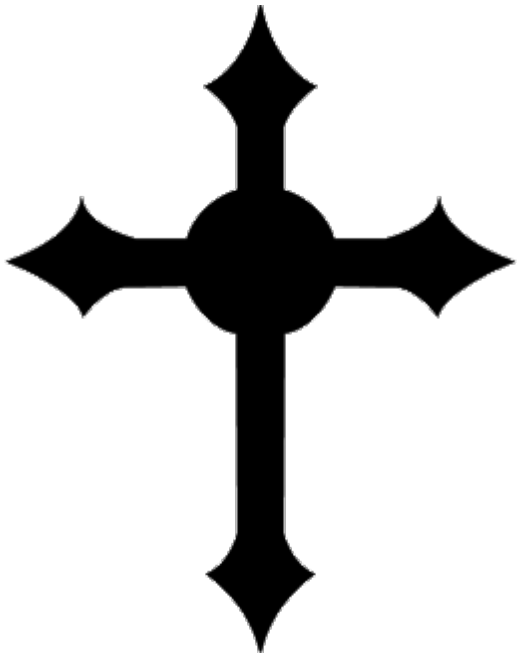
Search for a spot with accumulated Venom, then apply pressure. Look for another point, rinse and repeat. After a

good ten minutes, Willem let go of Kutori's back. The treatment had done enough, and now the body would naturally clean up any remaining Venom as the muscles and blood flow regained their strength.

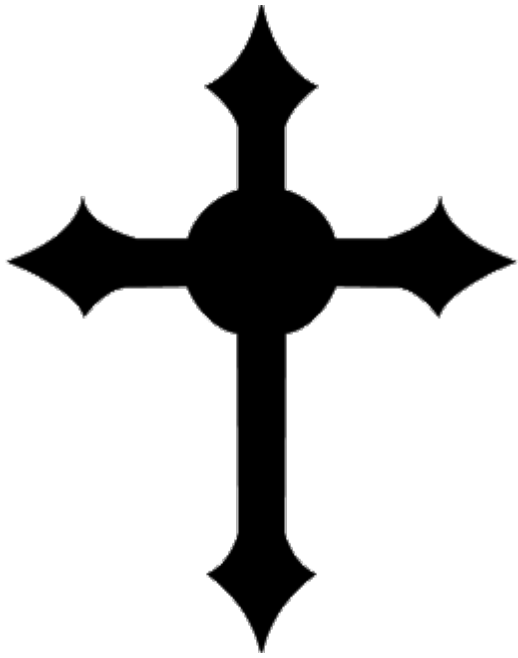
"Alright, should be fine now." He put the blanket back over Kutori, who looked a little dazed and exhausted from the barrage of stimulation. "Just get some more rest. After another night's sleep, you should be almost fully recovered."

"Ohkyay…." Not fully conscious, she mumbled an inarticulate response.

If left alone, Kutori would probably just fall asleep sooner or later. Willem figured she would be fine and exited the clinic.



What am I? Willem thought to himself, but he got sick of it and quickly stopped. He had other things he needed to think about at the moment.



Paper. Paper. Paper.

That was the first thing he saw as he entered the room. The next thing he saw, and the next, and the next, were all paper too. Puzzled, he took a step back to check the bronze plate beside the door. The words carved into it unmistakably read ‘Reference Room’.

He stepped back into the room, which appeared much narrower than it should

have due to the heaps of paper scattered about everywhere. Moreover, the papers within these stacks seemed to cover quite a wide variety of topics. A request for the fixing of a toilet here in the fairy warehouse, a guide on communication with other races during a battle with the 17 Beasts, a receipt for a large order of carrots and potatoes, a report from a night patrol mission, and a cutout from a girls' magazine all piled on top of each other.

The *tick, tick, tick* of the clock on the wall seemed to blare loudly throughout the mess of a room.

"Wow..."

He carefully entered the room, navigating through the hilly terrain covering the floor, and headed for the desk. Putting aside the stack of papers occupying the chair, Willem sat down and looked around the room once more.

“Wow...”

He crossed his arms and thought about how to go about cleaning up the place. After some consideration, he reached the conclusion that, no matter how long he thought about it, he would never reach a conclusion. Putting that decision off for the time being, Willem grabbed a piece of paper out from the bottom of a nearby mountain. It turned out to be an equipment inspection report from over ten years ago. So this room contained at least a decade of worthless history. He felt a little like an archaeologist.

Well, sitting around like that any longer would just be a waste of time. Reaching out to a nearby tower, he had decided to start off by classifying the menagerie of papers, when he noticed someone standing by the door. A girl with gray hair stared intently into the room with an unreadable look in her eyes.

Willem waited a bit, figuring that she must have come to pick up some document or something, but she didn't budge. She simply continued to stare into the room as if she were a statue.

"Do you need something Nephren?"

"Not really," she responded immediately in an indifferent tone, then turned around and just walked away.

"... I wonder what's up with her."

Shrugging his shoulders, Willem got back to work. He wanted to know something. And that something most likely lay somewhere at the bottom of this vast sea of paper.

The clock on the wall rang twelve times in succession, signaling the beginning of a new day. He had only just finished organizing the bundles of paper piled up on the desk. An all-nighter was beginning

to look inevitable, and whether or not working hard until morning would yield any useful results was also questionable.

"... I'm tired."

Hearing a rumble from his stomach, Willem realized that he had completely forgotten about food. He had been running without any nutritional refueling for almost half a day, since he last ate around noon.

"Aw crap..."

If he had noticed at least a little earlier, he might have been able to order a light meal at the cafeteria. Well, regretting that now didn't help fill his stomach at all. For the time being, he put his head down on the desk and closed his eyes. He could deal with an empty stomach, but continuing to ignore his fatigue would only degrade his concentration ability. A little rest would give him enough energy to resume work.

Suddenly, right before he lost consciousness, the scent of coffee drifted by his nose. His ears picked up the soft clank of a mug being placed on top of the desk. *Refreshments? Oh, well I guess I did leave the door open.*

"Ah, thanks–"

He was about to thank Naigrat when a head of gray hair entered his field of view. A pair of charcoal eyes stared blankly at nothing in particular.

"– Nephren?"

"You can call me Ren."

"Okay. Thanks, Ren."

Looking back at the desk again, he noticed that a plate, with a simple sandwich on top, had also been placed beside the coffee.

"You don't have to thank me for this," she

said as she surveyed the room. “I just got a little curious, so I came to look. What are you doing?”

“Hmm… I’m trying to investigate something, I guess.”

“In this place?”

“Yep. Treasure boxes are always hidden deep inside underground labyrinths, right? To find something valuable, you need to put in some hard work.”

“Hmm…”

Willem took a sip of the coffee. “It’s sweet.” He could feel the massive amount of dissolved sugar on his tongue.

“I thought it would be good since you’re tired. Do you not like it sweet?”

“Oh no, this is my favorite.”

To the surprise of Nephren, he

proceeded to chug the rest of the coffee and devour the sandwich, which consisted of grilled pigeon meat, slightly wilted lettuce, and somewhat dry bread. There might have been a bit too much mustard, but the extra flavor helped restore some vitality to his exhausted body.

"Ahh…." He let out a satisfied sigh as he felt the small nutritional boost do its work.

"So?" Nephren closed in on him with her expressionless face and asked, "What are you looking for this late?"

"Well… I guess there's no point in hiding it. I'm looking for you guys' battle records."

"Hm?" Confused, she tilted her head slightly. "Why?"

"I'm an outsider, a fake technician, and out of this generation. There's too much I don't know. Asking Naigrat is always an option, but since she's not a soldier, her

information will be from a different viewpoint. The best way, then, is to check the army's data with my own eyes."

"Hmm..."

"Don't think too much of it. I just want to know some stuff."

"Okay." Nephren nodded. "Is there anything you want me to do?"

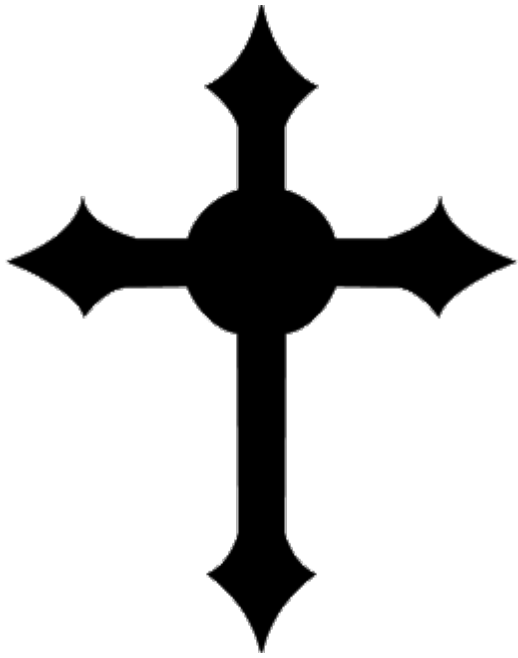
"Are you willing to help? Then, I need any documents related to the frequency of Teimerre appearances and records from battles in the past ten years detailing timing, resources spent, and final losses. Also, if possible, I want records about the repair and maintenance of Kali — Dug Weapons. For example, documents that tell what they tried, what they were aiming for, and what actually resulted."

"Hm. Very specific."

“I’ll do all the detailed checking. If you could just gather anything that might look relevant, it would be a big help.”

“Roger.”

Now that his stomach had been taken care of, it was time to get back to work. Willem rolled up his sleeves, and, a moment later, Nephren followed suit. The two started paddling through the great ocean of papers filling the room. As the night went on, however, they began to drown.



Morning came. Waking up at her usual time, Kutori Nota Seniolis sluggishly dragged herself out of bed and looked around, noticing that she didn't seem to be in her own room. After recognizing her surroundings as the clinic room, she tried hard to remember what happened last night, stumped as to why she had been sleeping in this place.

When she finally recalled the events with Willem the night before, her head instantly

came to a boil. The fever had weakened her. She had lost her proper sense of judgement. She wouldn't have done or said those things in her normal state of mind. Many excuses popped into her head, but none of them would undo what had already been done.

If I were to die in five days, would you be a little nicer to me?

"Ahhh why did I say that!?"

Kutori did a backwards dive back into the bed she just got out of and flailed about violently, ignoring the resultant loud creaking noises.

... if I asked for a kiss or something. What would you do?

"Aggghhh!!"

She squeezed the pillow with all her strength and pummeled it with her fists

and threw it against the wall. Why did she say those things? She had no idea. Well, it's true that she didn't exactly *hate* him, she thought fairly highly of him, and if she had to say then she probably leaned more towards the *like* side, but liking someone as a person and liking someone in *that* way are completely separate things and you shouldn't mix them but she couldn't blame the fact that he's been on her mind a lot lately all on the fever and — ahh! She couldn't bear thinking about it any longer.

On top of that, about halfway through the scene her memory became a little hazy. She felt like something happened after that... he said he was going to get rid of her fever or something–.

"Kutoriii, feeling better!?"

"Ah!" A voice suddenly came flying out of nowhere, so she reflexively panicked and hid underneath the covers. "Oh, I'm doing

okay."

"Ah, um... I heard that you were very tired when you came home yesterday, but are you fine now? Can you eat properly and stuff?"

Judging by the voices and movements, Kutori guessed that two people had dropped by for a visit.

"Collon and... Lakish?"

Slowly, she peeked out from within the bed and confirmed her guesses. All she needed to see to be certain were those flashy, bright pink and orange heads of hair.

"Hm? Your face is red," the pink haired Collon pointed out.

"A-Ah, is it? Are you sure it's not just the lighting?" Kutori avoided eye contact.

"But it looks like your body is fine.

Whenever you guys come back from fighting it always looks really bad, so I'm glad you're all better today," said the orange haired Lakish.

Now that she mentioned it, Kutori noticed that her body felt unusually light. Last night, she had passed out due to her overuse of Venom during the battle that took place earlier. Every time it got that bad in the past, the next morning a heavy fatigue would plague her. Getting off of the bed, she tried jumping up and down a little and discovered that she felt no fatigue at all. In fact, she felt great, as if she had been cured by some kind of magic spell.

"It's true, I feel really light."

"Just gotta have a fighting spirit and a little bravery!"

It's probably not that kind of problem, Kutori thought to herself.

“You just noticed now?”

“Ah, well….” She wondered what happened differently this time. Could it be that — her head started to boil again so she refrained from remembering the details — weird message? “… oh, do you guys know where he is?”

“He?” Lakish looked puzzled for a second, but then seemed to understand. “If you’re talking about Willem, I last saw him in the reference room.”

“The reference room… the place where we stuff all the stacks of paper?”

What could he possibly be doing in there? It was literally just a chaotic mess of paper, much less a place actually suitable for any kind of research. As far as Kutori knew, the fairies only ever went there to hide when skipping cleaning duty, since no one would think to check there.

“He was with Nephren.”

“... eh?”

“Collon!”

Lakish scolded her for leaking unnecessary information, but Collon didn’t seem to mind. “They were sleeping together on the sofa.” In fact, she continued and made things even worse.

“... ah.”

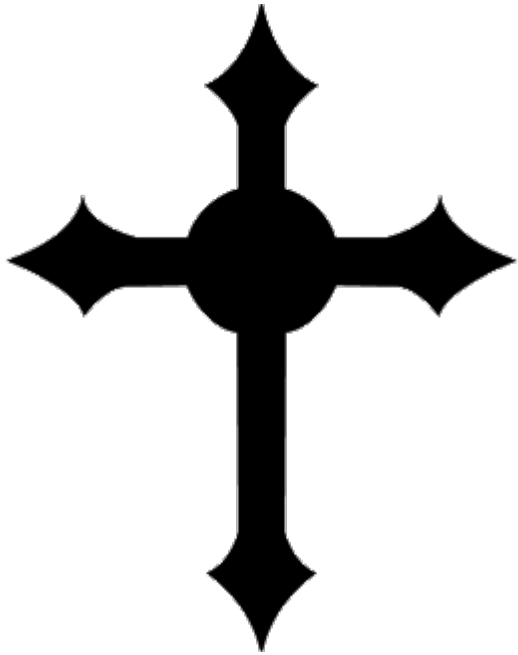
“Um... Kutori?”

“I remembered something I have to do, so I’m going to head out. Thanks for checking on me. As you can see, I’m all better now, so don’t worry.”

“Ah, okay. But....” Lakish cautiously looked up at Kutori. “Don’t be too harsh... okay?”

“What are you talking about?”

Kutori laughed and exited the clinic.



It was a good thing they excavated the sofa while working last night. Willem sat up, with an asleep Nephren still resting her head on his knees.

“Well... I guess we did find some things,” he muttered softly so as to avoid waking up his assistant.

In his hands, he held about a dozen

scraps of paper. While it wasn't the amount he had hoped for, and some unexpected items had gotten mixed in, Willem had still been able to find out a decent fraction of what he wanted to know.

He skimmed over one piece of paper which described the nature of fairies. According to it, the word fairy itself could refer to a number of different species: fire spirits that deceived lost travelers in forests, children with wings surrounded by a glowing aura of light, small people that only grew up to an average man's knees. All of the different fairy types seemed to be elusive and mischievous. They also used some kind of strange magic and tended to live in forests. Lastly, in many cases, they held special interest in humans, preferring to play their pranks on them.

The description seemed to fit pretty well with the fairies that Willem knew. However, he felt a little uneasy. He was

curious as to why the fairies as a race, who hardly differed from regular Emnetwyte girls except for the bright hair colors, got the name Leprechauns. But he decided to put that issue aside for later, considering all the other things he needed to know.

A lot can happen in five hundred years... Willem thought as he continued reading.

One paper laid out the basic theory of necromancy. It started by assuming the existence of the soul and went on to enumerate other occult beliefs. For example, the soul starts out pure white but gets colored by the surrounding environment as life proceeds. As a result, the soul takes more time to mature than the flesh. Even though a child may have a perfectly fine body, his soul will still be very different in structure than that of an adult.

So if one loses his body before his soul

has been fully colored by the world, in a way he will die before he is finished being born. The souls who meet this contradiction somehow ignore the world's rules, by which they should head towards the afterlife (if such a place exists), and instead continue to wander aimlessly among the living.

Those existences are called fairies. Lost souls that passed away at an age so young they couldn't recognize their own death. Because of this, their behavior imitates that of babies or young children. Guided by their curiosity, not knowing good from evil, sometimes innocent and sometimes cruel, they continue their mischief.

"But they will never have a place in this world... "

Willem glanced at the young girl still sleeping on his knees, then returned his eyes to the document. The remaining

section of the article made him feel queasy. To put it simply, it described a concrete method to artificially birth fairies for the purpose of utilizing them. Once it started talking about a sacrifice or something of the sort, he stopped reading. He wasn't particularly interested in learning necromancy.

Another document recounted a skirmish that took place five years ago. A fairy, unknown to Willem, had carried the Kaliyon named Insania into battle. She had fought three bodies of 'The 6th Beast' almost to the point where her Venom went berserk, but somehow lived and returned home. Willem quickly flipped through the pages of the document, which had many similar accounts. Occasionally he spotted mentions of 'the opening of the gate to the fairy homeland', which most likely alluded to deliberate self explosion by overuse of Venom.

Strictly speaking, fairies, including the subtype Leprechauns, were not living. They counted as a type of ghost. Consequently, they did not technically count as soldiers despite fighting with the army. Even if a fairy fell during battle, she would not be included in the official death toll.

"So that's why they're treated as weapons, not soldiers…" Willem muttered and gently patted the gray hair on top of his knee. He heard a small groan and thought he had woken Nephren, but soon her quiet snoring returned.

What am I? Willem thought to himself. Surely, any answer that he could find would be a lie. Yet he still felt that he needed to decide. Right here, right now, who was he? A shell without any place to belong in this age? An anachronism of a Quasi Brave who lost everything and had his dreams broken? A fake technician idly

spending his days just to make money? Or maybe...

A single ray of light slipped in from the window. Rain clouds still covered the sky, but the morning sun found a tiny crack to peek through. Willem squinted his eyes at the sudden change in brightness. Gazing beyond the light, for a second he thought he saw a familiar figure.

"... I wanted to quickly pay off this debt and go there too...." He chuckled.

"Shut up... quit complaining, hurry up and do all you can do," the figure from beyond the light seemed to respond.

Ah, damn it. That bastard. He has no idea what I've been going through these past six months.

"... Willem?" called a voice from on top of his knees.

“Ah, are you awake? Thanks for your help, I found a bunch of stuff.”

“Hm. I didn’t do anything you need to thank me for.” She rolled over to look at him. “You looked like you would shrivel up if I left you alone, so I just helped out a little.”

“But still, thank you,” Willem said as he patted her gray hair again. Nephren looked slightly annoyed, but didn’t swat away his hand. “Alright, we should get up. Looks like we have a guest.”

As soon as he said that, he heard a surprised yelp coming from the half opened doorway. The door creaked open, revealing a sleepy and for some reason grumpy Kutori.

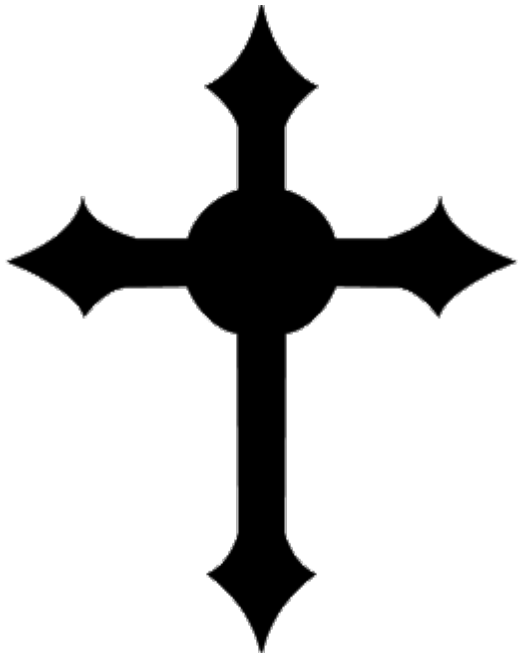
“... um, good morning.”

“Morning. How are you feeling?”

“Huh? Oh, um… really good, actually.”

“I’m glad… I realized that I’ve never tried that on a kid before. Was a bit worried I might have overdone it, but….” Kutori seemed to be taken aback at the mention of last night’s massage. “Also… you came at the perfect time. I need to check something. Ren, get up. It’s already morning.” He took Nephren’s head off his knees and put it on the sofa, then stood up. “Kutori, come with me for a little morning exercise.”

“…. huh?”



Sometime during their talk, the fickle sky had decided to clear up.

“Eh?’

Kutori stood in the middle of the field that the little kids used to play ball games. Nearby, she saw Willem doing some warm ups in flexible looking clothes. And then next to her, Nephren held out a long, thin bundle of cloth, which unmistakably contained a Dug Weapon. She looked at

Nephren and the package, then accepted it.

She knew this touch very well. Taking off the cloth wrapping would reveal the familiar silver blade. The Dug Weapon with the highest magic resonance efficiency in all of Regul Aire, Seniolis. Why was she being handed this now?

“Kutori. Do you like the little ones around here?”

“Huh?”

“The reason you’re prepared to die… is it to protect their future?”

“That… it doesn’t really matter.”

Willem was mostly right, but at the moment she didn’t feel like honestly admitting it. The whirlpool of emotions that she had trudged through to get to this point wasn’t so simple that it could be summed up with a couple words. Also, she

didn't want to recognize the fact that she used those kids as an excuse to justify her own death.

"Ah... I see."

Willem took the cloth off of the bundle he held, revealing a mass produced model of Dug Weapon. A few others of the same kind had been excavated so far, but they were usually considered inferior to the unique swords such as Kutori's.

"I want to see if the rumors are true. Come at me!"

"H-Huh?!"

Kutori questioned her ears for a second. Armed with a Dug Weapon, she could be considered one of the strongest fighting forces in all of Regul Aire. In other words, very strong. Not even a Reptrace fully armed with gunpowder weapons could reach her level.

“Do you understand? Just because you have a Dug Weapon too doesn’t mean you’re anywhere near equal. Only we have the power to activate those weapons.”

“Hmm, are you sure about that? Give it a try. You never know what might happen.”

“This isn’t a joke. Do you want to turn into minced meat?”

“That wouldn’t be very fun… although Naigrat would probably like that. Anyways, no need to worry. Hurry up and show me what you’ve got.”

“… well, if you say so.”

Now that she thought about it, Kutori realized that this wasn’t the first time Willem had said some nonsensical things. Also, she needed to inquire about Willem and Nephren’s little nap together. Intimidating him with her fighting prowess before bringing up those questions wasn’t

such a bad idea.

Sensing its user enter a battle stance, Seniolis emitted a low groaning sound. The numerous faint cracks running along the blade widened into fissures, out of which poured a faint light, the manifestation of Venom. The composition and inner workings of Dug Weapons were not well understood by the army. However, they knew that the swords seemed to grow in power proportionally to how much Venom the user poured in; if a Leprechaun went all out, even a Teimerre wouldn't be able to withstand the force. And that was all they needed to know.

"You're asking for it… so don't regret it afterwards."

Her enhanced concentration ability completely transformed her field of view. Color disappeared from her surroundings, and her actions seemed to happen in slow

motion, as if she were moving through water. She needed to cover about a twenty step distance, but in her current condition just two steps would suffice. The force of her steps would likely create small holes in the ground, but right now she didn't have time to care about that.

Willem still looked unprepared. It would be a total surprise attack. She locked her aim on the mass produced Dug Weapon held loosely at the tip of his right arm. If she could send that thing flying, it would be game over before either of them could injure each other.

The distance between them closed rapidly. Willem's right arm entered the range of Seniolis. No one could follow a Leprechaun moving at this speed, including, of course, Willem. He wouldn't have a chance to evade or counter the attack.

— Kutori was cut.

… *eh?* A blade bit into her from the left and continued diagonally up to her right shoulder, smashing a few ribs as it went. The silver tip of the blade ripped her lungs apart and, lastly, sunk into her heart. Her heightened senses allowed her to accurately grasp the condition of her wounds. Scarlet blood began to spurt out, drawing out a vivid arc against the blue sky in the background. She could feel death drawing close.

Why… this can't be… how…. Brief thoughts popped into her head sporadically, only to disappear a moment later. She had prepared herself for death, but hadn't expected it here. The approaching nothingness frightened her. Her eyes saw only the deep blue sky, rolling on forever and ever.

Kutori's back hit the ground, causing her

lungs to emit a shriek like a crushed cat's.

"... huh?"

With both arms and legs spread out widely, she lay on the ground, staring up at the sky. She remained in that dazed state for a few seconds, just waiting for her impending death. But eventually, she noticed that something was off. Cautiously moving her arm, she patted her side, where the blade had first struck. There was no wound. No blood was gushing out either. No pain. Not a shred of evidence of the immense violence just carried out against her remained.

"What... just happened?"

She sat up slowly. Seniolis, which she had apparently dropped at some point, rolled about on the ground beside her.

"You guys misunderstand the fundamentals of the Kaliyon."

Kutori panicked and turned around at the sound of Willem's voice. The black haired young man stood there lazily with absolutely no signs of distress.

"It doesn't change strength in response to how much Venom the user has. Can you imagine if the swords forged to help the overwhelmingly weak, almost Venomless Emnetwyte defeat the overwhelmingly strong Elves and Dragons just raised the weaklings' power a teeny bit?"

Willem started blabbering on and on about something. Kutori suddenly felt very irritated at him, but she didn't exactly know why. Something inside her head just seemed to tell her that she couldn't listen to his speech anymore.

She focused. Again, her field of view started to transform. Lunging out, Kutori snatched Seniolis off the ground and, keeping her body low, headed toward

Willem for an attack. She didn't see the attack that just hit her, but she figured it must have been some counter technique that utilized her own momentum against her. Kutori, blinded by the advantage of being able to activate her Dug Weapon and thereby obtaining accelerated senses, hadn't even considered such a possibility before. Willem had struck precisely in that blind spot brought about by her negligence. The fake death she saw was also not simply a delusion, but rather the real future that Kutori would have met if Willem followed through. She had no choice but to admit that, for some strange reason, he had some skill with a sword.

However, Kutori refused to acknowledge other things. She could not reject the way of fighting with Dug Weapons used by the fairies that she had clung to for so long. Right now, her body moved with more ease than normal. To her chagrin, Willem's massage might have played a part in that,

but she was thankful nonetheless. Fueled by Venom, she sprinted in two strides a distance that normally would have been about ten steps long. Coming to a sudden stop just out of the range of Willem's weapon, Kutori purposefully waited for a split second to throw off his timing, then leaped into the air. The silver blade in her right hand aimed for his shoulder, but the real attack would be a kick with her left leg straight into his side. If it landed, the kick, enhanced by Venom, would likely knock Willem out. But she had to go that far, or else he wouldn't understand.

Understand what?

A moment's doubt popped into her head, but she immediately tossed it out. This time, she could see Willem's movements. With a relaxed motion, he raised his sword and parried the incoming blow from Seniolis. This threw Kutori off for a fraction of a second, giving Willem the

opportunity to drive his left hand right into her side.

The dynamics of the situation turned chaotic. Kutori's body twisted and turned while flying off through the air.

W-What!?

Once again, the cloudless autumn sky filled her view. However, at least this time she didn't seem to be dying yet. She reached out with her left arm and forcibly braked her body using her fingers. The five fingernails digging into the dirt felt like they would rupture, but Kutori was able to stabilize her posture.

"Wow... nice recovery."

Willem's astonished voice only annoyed her more. She was the astonished one here.

"... how did you?" Kutori asked, her voice shaking with frustration.

“Hm? Which one?” Willem responded nonchalantly.

It seemed like he could tell that she had multiple questions in store for him. Kutori, having lost the motivation to try any more surprise attacks, strolled up to him and casually took a swing with Seniolis. Willem calmly held up his own sword to block the strike. She could see light pouring out from the cracks of his blade.

“No matter how hard I push my spell vision, I don’t see any traces of Venom coming from your body. But that sword is definitely activated. What kind of rule violation is this?”

“I was in the middle of explaining that when you decided to try and kill me…. The Kaliyon is designed to utilize the power of anyone that its blade touches, not the user’s. The stronger the opponent, the more powerful the sword becomes. That’s

why it could be used to kill the Dragons and the gods. This time, my Percival in a sense copied all that Venom you ignited to activate Seniolis. Now then…"

Kutori felt something run down her spine. An attack was coming. Her body instinctively threw itself backwards with all its strength while accelerating her senses and draining the color from her vision. After her lightning fast evasion, she lost her balance and ended up on the ground.

She couldn't tell whether or not that was the right move, for Willem had not actually moved an inch. He remained in the same posture, idly holding his sword out, with an expression of slight admiration being the only thing that changed.

"Your body and thoughts seem to move well. The Venom must be doing its job. Also, you have good perception. Although you could improve on your strategy, that's

not really necessary for the type of fighting that you do. On top of that, you still have the option of going berserk, huh? … I see. It's no surprise that you've been able to fight your way through until now."

Willem threw down the sword in his right hand. Kutori, still wary of any more tricks, stood up and knit her brows, but he just kept talking.

"I'm relieved. You are strong, and you still have room for growth. So… that's why… you need to come home." By the end, Willem's voice had become almost a whisper.

His body wobbled slightly before collapsing to the ground face up, knocking up a cloud of dust. Kutori still didn't let her guard down. She carefully watched his sword lying on the ground, his two legs poking out at her, his arms opened widely as if to embrace the sky, his lifeless eyes

staring up at the sky... lifeless?

As soon as Kutori noticed something amiss, Nephren walked up to check his heartbeat and pulse.

“Ah.” She didn’t sound very surprised.

“W-What happened?” Kutori asked, still remaining alert. She had just been startled by Willem over and over again, so she couldn’t falter now. Or at least that’s what she told herself as she continued to hold onto Seniolis.

“He’s almost dead,” Nephren said with a sigh.

“.... eh?”

5 The Strong Mechanical Woman

The large, boulder like face of a Reptrace appeared though the communication crystal.

“The prophecy remains. The surge will strike at the previously marked land. We must make haste; release the falcons and sharpen the arrowheads.”

He spoke with the strange manner and hard to understand pronunciation characteristic to the Reptrace. One not used to it would have a difficult time grasping the meaning of his message, which, when translated to plain language, went something like this:

“There have been no changes in the prediction. The attack will be carried out at the previously anticipated place and time.

We must hurry to prepare the battlefield and our weapons."

"... ah, got it. Or, actually, I already knew," responded Naigrat, trying to suppress the anger boiling up inside her head. If the enemy's movements were all going according to plan, that meant her's would too. *Can't you find a way to do this without using those 'arrowheads'!?* Her mouth felt like it would move on its own and scream that if she let her guard down even a little.

So Naigrat locked up all of her emotions inside and, in one corner of her brain, created a new self. One that could always choose the best option without hesitation and act without being swayed by weak emotions. A mechanical self that she could force to do all the talking.

"Three days from now, at the eighth hour, I will dispatch three out of five current Dug Weapon users to the harbor

district, fully armed."

You guys are soldiers aren't you!? Putting yourself out there on the front lines prepared for death is part of your job, isn't it!? Then why do none of you die!? Why are our girls always the only sacrifices!?

"One of the three, fairy soldier Kutori Nota Seniolis, will open the gate to the fairy homeland during the mission."

I don't believe that you're doing your best! I won't recognize it! Fight harder! Think harder! Find another way to fight! Save our children!

"The other two, fairy soldiers Aiseia Myse Valgalis and Nephren Ruq Insania, will stand by as reserves. If the battle is not resolved after Seniolis opens the gate, they will go in armed with Dug Weapons at the discretion of those present at the scene."

They still don't know what it's like to be in love. They've never known any true happiness.

Yet why... why must they go so soon?

"The aforementioned 'arrowheads' will be supplied to the Winged Guard by the Orlandri Trading Company's 4th Warehouse."

... why can't we take their place?

But Naigrat already knew the answer to that. Fully grown fairies have the capability to wield immense power. So of course, the superiors in the army knew well the advantages of using them as sacrifices in battle. Not swayed by emotion like her, they probably understood the necessity much better.

Yet the sacrificial nature of the weapons meant that they had to be prepared to suffer permanent losses in order to even have a chance at victory. Still, there could be no replacements for the fairies. Anything else would be like pouring a measly cup of water onto a raging inferno

threatening to swallow an entire island. Even though Naigrat might have been feared among the locals as a troll, in the end she was just that: a mere troll. She couldn't protect a single thing she wanted to protect or take a single thing she wanted to take. Naigrat knew. She knew all too well.

With a snap, the transmission coming through the communication crystal got cut off. And with it, the emotions bottled inside her also snapped.

"Agghhhh!!!" Naigrat howled in agony. "Why!? Why why why!?!?" Facing up at the ceiling, she simply screamed out all the frustration as it came to her.

That mechanical self she created in the corner of her brain? She threw that disgusting thing in the trash can and shredded it to bits.

"Why... why... "

The surge of emotions began to dry up, and her screams turned into quiet sobs. Large teardrops flooded her eyes before dropping down to her knees, staining her skirt.

Naigrat had once decided to be a strong woman. One that the girls could comfortably rely on for support. One that could be the next best thing to the mother that the girls never had. Or, at least, one that could act that way.

That day, she vowed to herself. No matter what happened, she must not cry. The girls were the ones who truly needed to cry, the ones that truly felt afraid. So Naigrat needed to be there to stop those tears. No matter how frustrated she got or how much she had to suppress her feelings, she needed to be able to support the girls with a smile.

I was an idiot... how could I possibly do that?

How could I ever stop their tears if I can't even stop my own?

The failure of a strong woman wailed like a baby. No one was there to comfort her. No one would stop her tears. So she cried, and cried, and cried, with no end in sight.

"Coming in! Emergency business!"

"Naigrat, are you in here?"

"B-B-Big trouble!"

It all happened very suddenly. The door flung open with such force that she thought it might break, and three little fairies popped into the room. Fortunately, she still sat facing the communication crystal, so only her back was visible from the door. If she could just hold back her tears for a little, the girls wouldn't see her in this miserable state.

"H-Hey, at least knock before entering a

room." She scolded them quietly while still facing away, trying to hide the trembling in her voice.

"Don't got time for that! This is emergency business!"

"Come quick! We really need to hurry!"

"If we don't go now, they might really die!"

Die? Oh... are they talking about that? If they were talking about Kutori, then of course Naigrat already knew. But that wasn't for another three days. Kutori, as the oldest fairy, always tried to act all grown up, but inside she was really still a kid. A spoiled child at heart who refused to act like one, and also...

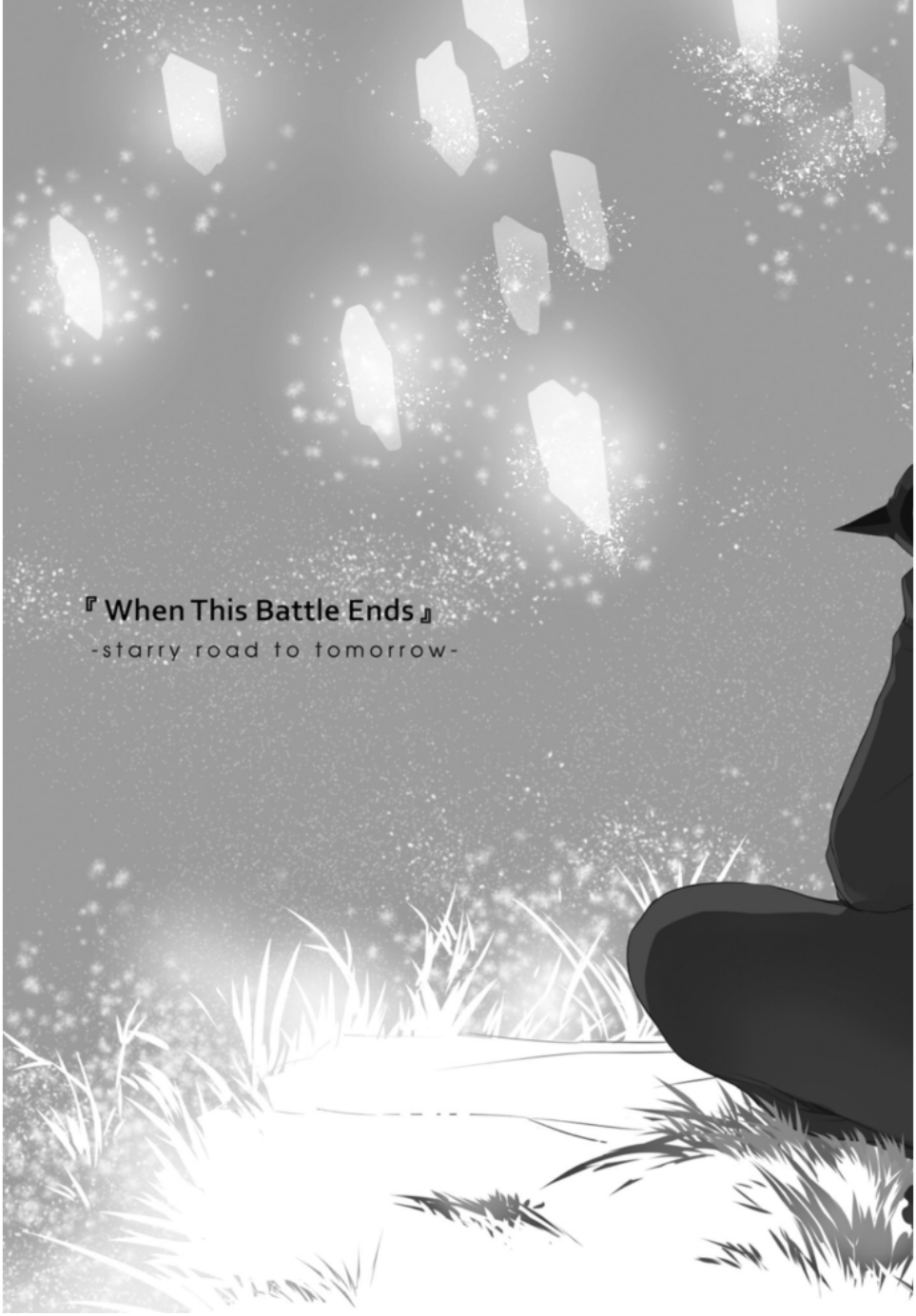
"Willem looks like he's going to die!"

Silence.

... *huh? Die? Willem?* One by one, the

words reached her brain, which had been numbed from all the crying. She simply sat and processed the information for a few seconds, then...

"What in the world happened!?" she screamed and grabbed a medicine box and dashed out of the room.


『When This Battle Ends』
-starry road to tomorrow-

I That Day Long Long Ago

The long, long battle finally came to an end. The sun had already sunk and risen three times. On the battlefield, where a towering mountain once stood, ocean water flowed into the newly created colossal gulf. The hellfires devouring the trees, showing no signs of extinguishing, left a trail of death and blackened ash in their wake.

Countless metal pieces lay scattered around the area. Upon closer inspection, one with the proper knowledge would recognize them as the remains of various Talismans. The most common fragments were those of the ‘arrow reflection’ Talisman, specially made in the central workshops of the Holy Empire. The copper fragments floating on the waves belonged

to the ‘disease resistance’ Talisman originating in West Garmond. The drops of liquid iron glowing hot red on the trees came from the ‘destiny guard’ Talisman, which had been a closely guarded secret of the Selenslode mage faction until just a few days ago. A compilation of the most powerful magic available to humans, drawn from literally all over the world, rolled about on the ground, already used up long past its limits.

“Geez, that took longer than expected.” Not even the strength to lift a single finger remained in the young man’s body. Throwing down his broken sword, he sat down on a nearby boulder. “No one told me I would have to go this far to win.”

“I’m the one who should be saying that, youngster.” The unpleasant voice of an old man shook the air around him slightly, as if resounding up from the bottom of some deep abyss. “But… squeezing every last

drop out of that puny life of yours to come this far… I'll recognize you for that point alone."

"Doesn't make me feel any better. Not like being recognized by you is going to extend my time remaining… more importantly, how the hell are you even talking? You're dead by now, aren't you?"

"Indeed. After having my body so thoroughly destroyed, even I must now be immersed in the silence of death. Exchanging thoughts with you right now is merely my echo."

"Ah, I see. Well I feel better now."

Seven highly forbidden spells, eleven Percival swords enhanced to the point of self destruction, and even secret sword techniques that he was unqualified to use. If he still couldn't finish the job after using all those, he would be out of options.

"... it's kind of late to be saying this, but that was marvelous. Wielding that much power all by yourself, despite being a weak human... truly terrifying. If you used that strength against the humans, you could probably raze two or three countries within one night. But... I guess in the end, that power came with a price, huh?"

A thin, stringy substance resembling fog whirled around the young man. The wisps gradually increased in number and clinged to his body, as if trying to tie him up.

"Using forbidden spells on such a large scale... the backlash will surely curse and torment the user. Simply chanting one can cause one's body to break and soul to disappear. Multiplying that by seven... I cannot even imagine such horrifying pain."

"If I was going to die anyway, it didn't matter if I used one or seven... on top of that, there's no way I can fight anymore, so

pain and suffering don't matter."

"... doesn't seem like a reasonable justification."

"I've been told that since long ago, but being told by an actual monster feels somewhat different."

A cackling laugh.

"I guess if you weren't prepared for that, you wouldn't challenge a god, huh? Well, it's about time for us to part. I now enter a hundred year's sleep."

"Hurry up and get lost. At least be quiet as you go to meet your death."

"Alright, alright. I'll honor your request as a reward for your victory..."

The voice faded away, melting into the wind along with the sense of intimidation that had filled the surrounding air.

"... hey, you dead yet?" the young man asked, but no answer came.

A dry crackling sound came from his feet. Mustering all his remaining strength just to bend his neck and look down, the young man saw his ankles transforming into a lump of stone. The sound intensified as the dull, gray color climbed up his body. Knees. Thighs. Back. Up and up it went. Seven fatal curses all piled up on top of each other, mixing and interfering in a complex way to produce the phenomenon occurring in front of his eyes.

His entire body up to his chest now almost completely transformed into stone, the young man laughed.

"Well, I was planning on returning home... but I guess things aren't going to work out so nicely."

He gazed up at the sky and uttered his final words, in the vain hopes that they

would reach those important people, who were surely somewhere far away, looking up at the same blue sky.

"Sorry, Leila. You're gonna have to return home with just master. Sorry, Suwon. You're gonna have to deal with Leila's selfishness in my stead. Emi... I don't think I had any promises with you. I'm sure you'll be fine on your own, but live a good life for me."

And also... also...

As he spoke, his body continued to transform into stone at a frightening speed. There were too many names he wanted to call in the too short time he had remaining. The young man sifted through all the faces floating around in his head and narrowed them down to just one.

"Almaria... I'm really sorry." The last name he chose was that of the 'Daughter', who waited in an orphanage in a faraway

land. “It looks like I won’t be able to eat that butter cake after all.”

A soft clink signaled the end. All that remained was a mass of stone in the shape of a young man.

2 The Someone That Should Not Be Living

"What happened?" Those were Naigrat's first words after finishing the treatment. "How did your body get like this?"

"Hahaha, well, it seems I've gotten a lot weaker. I hadn't held a sword in such a long time, so my body couldn't keep up."

"This isn't a joke. It's your own body, so you should properly understand what's happening to it."

Naigrat had a serious face on, and for some reason her eyes looked a little bloodshot. On top of that, Willem sensed her voice quivering slightly. It looked like he wouldn't be able to laugh his way out of this one.

"To put it simply, you're a mess. Almost

all of your bones have small cracks in them that aren't healing. Many tendons are unable to recover from their weakened state. About half of your organs aren't functioning properly. I'm guessing your blood vessels are pretty beat up too, although that's out of my field of specialty."

Willem had expected most of these things. While he didn't have much medical knowledge, he was at least aware of his own body's poor condition.

"With this many wounds in your flesh, I think my teeth would bite right through without cutting it up with a knife first..."

He wished she didn't say that with such a sad look on her face.

"Moreover, these wounds aren't just from yesterday and today. Most of them are old wounds that have gotten worse. Which means you've been living with these heavy wounds this whole time and kept it

hidden?"

"Well, I wasn't really keeping it a secret."

"If you act like you're okay and don't say anything, it's the same thing. How have you been able to walk and move normally in this condition…." Naigrat sighed deeply. "These wounds… they're aftereffects of turning into stone, aren't they?"

"More accurately, they're the damage I took in the last battle before that. Well, it was a miracle that I even lived, so I couldn't really complain."

"That's not an excuse to treat your own life so lightly."

"I guess…." Willem attempted to shrug his shoulders but was met with a sharp pain throughout his body, so he just put on a faint smile.

"Don't push yourself so hard," said

Naigrat as she grasped his hand. Willem's heart instinctively began to beat a little faster. "You'll lose your flavor."

Well, he expected something like that from her.

"You're okay with me telling the kids about you, right?"

"Yeah, like I said, I wasn't keeping it a secret in the first place. If you think it's necessary, tell them all you want."

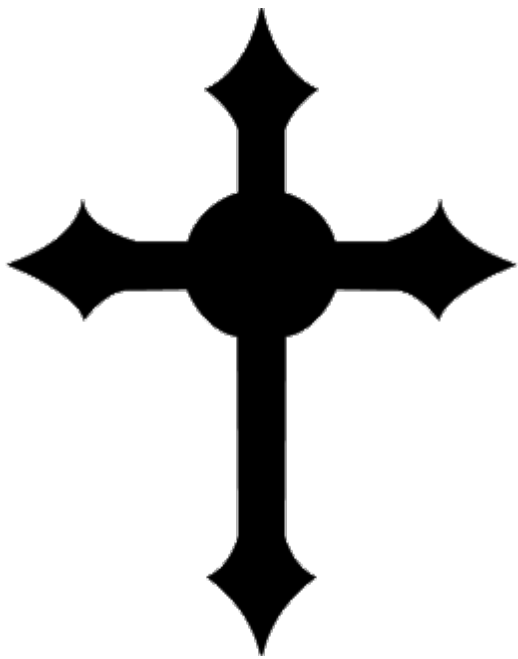
"Alright, then I'll go right now. You stay put and sleep for a bit. I think you already know, but you are strictly forbidden from doing anything that'll strain your body. I don't even know how you're still alive."

"Got it. Not trying to become your dinner anyways."

"Don't joke around. I'm being serious."

"Ah... okay."

Naigrat seemed pretty angry, despite her saying something about his flavor just a minute ago. Willem felt that was a little irrational, but decided to not provoke her further. He figured that would be best for both of them, and, more than anything, he realized that pushing aside her genuine concern with a joke might not have been very polite.



She chose the dining hall as the most appropriate place to call a meeting. With

the eyes of around twenty fairy girls all concentrated on her, Naigrat sighed.

“Staring at me so expectantly won’t make what I’m going to say any more interesting…”

“We’ll be the judges of that afterwards. Right now, we want to hear the truth, interesting or not,” said Aiseia, as the other girls nodded along.

Naigrat, realizing she wouldn’t be getting out of this one, took a deep breath and started talking.

“It was spring of last year, a little before I was sent here. I was dispatched to help out a salvager group by the Orlandri Trading Company.”

“Salvagers!”

A few of the fairies, their eyes seeming to sparkle, breathed sighs of admiration. The

image of salvagers as heroes braving danger in pursuit of treasure and romance had gained quite a lot of popularity amongst the children of Regul Aire. Well, usually among boys, but anyway...

"That group of salvagers never had much luck. They had gone down to the land many times, but never made much of a profit. That day was no different. We were about to return home empty handed, when one member of the group suddenly took a wrong step and fell underground. There, he discovered an enormous underground frozen lake. And sunk at the bottom of that lake was the stone statue of a markless young man."

"Just like in Icicle Coffin!" One girl blurted out the title of a fairy tale.

"Except there was a statue inside instead of a princess. One of my companions with the ability to see spell power confirmed

that it was not just a statue, but a real man turned to stone by some curse. So, of course, we couldn't just leave him be and go home.

It took a lot of work, but we managed to break the ice surrounding the statue and carry it back up to the islands. After about a month in the hospital, the stone began to lift from the man's body and he regained consciousness.

It was a lot of trouble at first. He would freak out every time he saw a Borgle or an Orc, and he didn't understand our language at all. We could finally talk, though, after calling a special translator from the Trading Company.

It was then that we found out. He was a genuine Emnetwyte. The last of the soldiers that had turned every other race on the land into their enemies. We didn't know why, but he had been sleeping at the

bottom of that frozen lake for hundreds of years…"

"He was down there for so long, but never got eaten by Beasts?"

"Well, probably because he was stone. I guess that was the one fortunate thing about his situation."

Later, they found a way to deal with the language barrier problem relatively easily. Next to his ice casing, rolling around in the lake, was an ancient Talisman which gave its user the power to understand any language. With that, the young man started telling his story and began to understand the reality he faced. Naigrat would never forget the young man's face of despair or wails of anguish.

The last survivor of the long extinct Emnetwyte. Naigrat and her companions decided to keep this special identity a secret, as he requested. She didn't know

much about what happened after that. He ended up living on the 28th Island, despite it being so unfriendly to markless, and simply worked nonstop to pay off various debts. She only heard all that from a salvager.

After that… he came here. In the six months since his arrival, he had grown taller, learned to laugh more, and showed an unexpected amount of kindness to the children. But the gloomy, black feeling of emptiness visible in his eyes alone had not changed one bit since then.

“And that’s all I know.”

Naigrat had tried to tell as much as possible while leaving out her own subjective impressions. The girls all turned to each other and whispered secretively.

“I can’t say any more. All I have left is just one request. It might be hard at first, but I don’t want anyone to be scared of or

alienate him. That's it."

Finished with her briefing, Naigrat left the cafeteria. As she walked down the hallway, she wondered if she made a mistake. The Emnetwyte were a hated race. Although Willem might not have played a direct role, they were unmistakably the ones who released the 17 Beasts, bringing destruction upon the world.

She didn't think the girls necessarily had the same attitude as the rest of society, but they might have a similar reaction regardless. After all, they existed as disposable weapons for the sole purpose of fighting the Beasts. The Emnetwyte would then be the ones responsible for creating that destiny. Still, if possible, she hoped the kids wouldn't reject Willem.

He didn't belong anywhere in this world. So she didn't want him to break, here in what might be the only place that he could

smile. Willem himself didn't seem too concerned, seeing as how he tried to find the truth behind the fairies and even hinted at his own true identity to them. Naigrat didn't deny that decision, which is why she just told the girls about his past. However, she still hadn't given up on her wish. Maybe it was a selfish wish, but she wanted the children to stay by Willem's side, just like they had been doing for the past six months.

She suddenly stopped walking. A bad feeling crept up on the back of her neck. *No. Not now. Not with this timing*, she thought. But at the same time, she could see it happening. They would do something like that. She quickly reversed direction and rushed to the clinic. Right as she was turning the corner…

"Willem! We heard all about you!"

"The Emnetwyte look so similar to us!"

“Very interesting. Tell us more about your generation.”

“Um... I don’t know what to say, but... feel better soon!”

Fairies had crowded into the clinic, pestering poor Willem, a patient lying on the bed with grave wounds who had just almost died, with their loud and energetic voices.

“...”

Naigrat stood by the door in shock for about ten seconds, and then took another five seconds to laugh at the ridiculousness of everything she had been thinking about just a few minutes ago. She should have easily predicted this development, yet why did she worry so much? Taking a deep breath to calm down used another seven seconds.

“You guys...”

The girls stopped bustling about at the sound of her voice and slowly turned their necks to face the door.

“He’s very tired right now and needs rest, so please keep your voices down. Naughty children that don’t listen….” Naigrat slowly spread her lips into a wide smile. “You know what happens to them, right?”

Within ten seconds, the girls had all scrambled out of the door and sprinted down the hallway.

“Ohh, that did the trick,” said Aiseia, walking up from behind.

“If you’re going to be loud, I’ll chase you out too, you know?”

“Hahaha, I wouldn’t want that,” Aiseia responded with a laugh, then put on an ambiguous expression. Whether that was a joking face or a serious face, Naigrat couldn’t tell. “But, I wanted to quickly

confirm something with that Mr. Almost Died over there. Will ya permit just that?"

"... what do you want to ask?"

Before Naigrat could say anything, Willem himself answered. At this point, she couldn't interfere. Aiseia sneaked into the room with her usual smile on and pulled up a chair beside the bed.

"First, just to make sure. You're an Emnetwyte, yes?"

"Mhm, I guess they started to be called that sometime. When I lived down there, we didn't have a special name for ourselves. Just saying 'people' referred to us, and any other race was basically equivalent to the Monstrous in our eyes."

"Pretty savage, huh?"

"Well, I won't deny that... anyways, what was your main question?"

Aiseia suddenly changed her smile into a serious look, then, in a low voice, asked, “Why does an Emnetwyte care about us so much? I’m thankful for what you’ve done, Second Enchanted Weapons Technician. But now that I know who you really are, I can’t understand the reason why you try so hard. Like how you fought Kutori with that beaten up body. You knew you were risking your life, didn’t you? Going that far without any real reason... it’s kinda weird, ya know?”

“Being nice to girls is common sense.”

“... simple, huh?” Aiseia brightened her face a little and started scratching her cheek. “Well, I guess the biologists do say that males being kind to females is the default.”

The Leprechaun race has no male members, or at least none have ever been found so far. Because they multiply by naturally appearing, as opposed to sexual

reproduction, not having any guys around presents no risk to survival. But, since they effectively have no sense of gender separation, Aiseia might not understand what Willem was getting at.

“Hmm, oh. Do you like kittens?”

“Ahh… as much as anyone else does.”

“Do you feel like you want to protect one when you see it?”

“I guess… as much as anyone else does.”

“It’s basically the same thing as that.”

“Still don’t get it…”

Willem thought for a moment.

“Well, this is something I heard a long time ago. Things with cute appearances don’t just randomly appear out of nowhere. They acquire that feature because of their instinct or need to be protected and loved.

That's why children are always cute, whether they be humans or beasts. They have a desperate wish to be taken care of... or something like that."

"…. so you're saying we're like that too?"

"If you guys' true form is just a 'soul', then that should be able to take any form it wants, right? But it just so happens to take shape as a child, and moreover a female child. Makes sense, doesn't it?"

"So our race is like a bunch of babies wanting to be spoiled... if you add the fact that you're into little girls, then I guess it makes sense."

"How did you get to that conclusion!?"

The pair laughed cheerfully.

Watching them, Naigrat began to feel a bit pitiful for worrying so much earlier. In the end, it turned out that neither the

fairies nor Willem thought about things as deeply as she expected. They all simply followed their own reasoning or instincts. Or, in other words, they were a group of idiots. And, of course, idiots are idiots because they can't grow wiser so easily. They were idiots because they could laugh and laugh so freely.

Ahh... I love you all. Whenever Naigrat said that out loud, for some reason everyone would always look frightened, so she could only scream it out inside her head.

3 The Lost Girl and the Flying Lizard

... what am I doing?

Kutori Nota Seniolis ran. She dashed out of the warehouse, bolted through the thick forest, sprinted across the harbor, and when there was no more land for her to run on, she spread her wings and took to the skies.

She didn't know why. But she felt like she had to. It was the only option in her mind. After that short mock battle with Willem, she generally understood what he had wanted to demonstrate. She made the mistake of understanding, and now she couldn't bear it.

Comparing the normal firepower currently available to the army to the strength of the incoming Teimerre,

chances of victory seemed slim. So the military wanted to temporarily increase its arsenal by preparing a sacrifice. That was the current situation in a nutshell. But this situation now had a better solution: permanently raise the base amount of firepower.

From the very beginning, they knew that the fairies weren't drawing out the full potential of the Dug Weapons as wielded by the Emnetwyte. After all, being such ancient weapons, they must have degraded in quality at least a little since then. On top of that, due to the lack of a convenient user's manual, they had to figure out how to work with the swords by trial and error. They also, of course, had to fool the swords' confirmation systems by using the fairies as a dummy race, forcing them to activate.

So, obviously, if someone that actually knew how to use the weapons magically

appeared, the situation would change drastically. They could recalculate. Change plans. Eliminate the sacrifices.

But that would be equivalent to admitting that their way of fighting up until now had been mistaken. It would mean that they had lost so much, sacrificed so many, all for nothing. It would belittle their resolve and determination, the results of a long and tormenting struggle to accept their grim fate, as worthless.

"No!"

Six months ago, on that day when an attack from an especially large Teimerre had been predicted. That very moment, when it was announced that no effective strategy existed other than to make Leprechaun soldier Kutori Nota Seniolis go berserk.

"I was so scared…"

Of course, she didn't want to die. After finding out that her time remaining was limited, a myriad of things she wanted to try, goals she wanted to accomplish, and dreams she wanted to come true popped into her head. She had cried and cried, then tried to act strong.

"I was finally able to accept it..."

A little over half a month ago, she decided that she would no longer cry. Yet now, she felt something welling up in her eyes. *Damn it! No... I can't.* The more she tried to resist, the more she tried to act tough, the faster her bottled up emotions surged up and overflowed.

She shut her eyes tight and ceased to flap her wings, bringing her into freefall. The whistling of the wind roared in her ears. Directly below, a sea of white, thick clouds spread out. *Perfect*, she thought. If she flew through those clouds, her whole body

would get soaked, concealing any evidence of tears. So she simply let herself fall, giving up the controls to gravity.

The clouds enveloped her. Clouds are basically patches of thick fog appearing in high places. Even though they look like cotton, they have no texture, and flying straight through one won't make a splash or anything. It was merely a white nothingness of air that damped her entire body.

"Ah."

Oops, she thought. Kutori realized that she had forgotten something very important. It was autumn. Which meant winter was close. Which meant, if you soaked yourself, it got very very cold.

"Uhh..."

Flying through the air takes a lot of physical strength, for birds and fairies alike.

Unfortunately for Kutori, piercing cold also tends to rapidly drain that strength. And to make things worse, no rocks that would make for a convenient resting place seemed to be floating around.

Somehow make it to the nearest island? Try to go back the way I came? Neither seemed particularly impossible, but the former didn't seem very realistic if she wanted to go home any time soon. Then, turning back looked like the only option, but she hesitated to follow through.

What to do.... Plunging through the clouds head first, she racked her brain. Only that one conclusion popped into her head, but, not wanting to choose that for some reason, she kept forcing herself to think.

"... hm?"

In the corner of her pure white field of view, a black shadow suddenly appeared.

— five minutes later.

The second floor of the Winged Guard patrol ship ‘Baroque Pot’. The small strategy room. Very small. Of course, as a strategy room, it needed a certain minimum amount of surface area to accompany an appropriate crowd. And, in the room currently were only two people, including Kutori. So why did it feel so narrow?

The answer was simple: the other one of the two happened to be a giant Reptrace whose height easily doubled Kutori’s. His width also looked to be about twice her’s, and his body weight and presence seemed to be about eight times larger. Drying her face with a borrowed towel, Kutori looked up at the Reptrace’s face.

“... sorry to intrude so suddenly, First Officer Limeskin. I saw you flying close by, so...”

“Worry not. The gate of respite is always open to honorable warriors,” the Reptrace replied as he placed a cup of medicinal tea on the table. She found the sight of the gigantic Reptrace delicately handling the tiny cup somewhat humorous.

“Thank you.”

Kutori took a sip, and, after burning her tongue, found out the drink was in fact very hot. And also very very bitter.

“However, I am curious as to why you were flying through a cloud in this season. Especially right before an important battle.”

“Ah….” She fumbled for words, debated with herself, thought deeply, then finally managed an answer. “About that battle… is it too late to say that I’m scared of dying?”

“Hm?”

The Reptrace raised one eyebrow — or at least she felt he did. Of course, Reptrace don't actually have eyebrows so it was just a feeling, but...

"Willem... the Second Enchanted Weapons Technician..."

"Hm?"

Kutori knew. She knew that the Second Enchanted Weapons Technician Willem Kumesh living in the fairy warehouse was a soldier only on paper, an existence with nothing but an empty title. But, thinking about it differently, that meant he must look like a proper soldier just going by the army documents. And according to those documents, Willem's direct superior was the giant Reptrace standing before her eyes, First Officer Limeskin.

"There is a way of fighting different from what we've been doing. I saw a little demonstration, and while I couldn't tell

what happened very well, I understood one thing clearly. That method of fighting had much better chances of victory and much higher efficiency than ours."

"Hmm?"

Kutori looked down into the tea cup. "And I didn't want to accept that. That my 'sister' was wrong... or that there's no need to die... I didn't want to believe it. So I decided to not listen to his words. I figured I didn't have much time left anyway, so I would prove it on the battlefield. Prove that my 'sister' and the others were right. I thought I needed to protect their way of fighting. But..."

"You were afraid?"

She hesitated to nod. It might have been a Reptrace cultural thing or something, but Limeskin took the idea of being a soldier very seriously. She didn't know all the details and such, but apparently she

qualified as a soldier by his standards. If Kutori nodded here, he would most definitely lose respect for her. He would see her as one who lost all courage and threw away the right to carry the title of soldier. But in the end, she couldn't bring herself to lie.

"...yes."

"... I see." The Reptrace suddenly produced a scraping ceramic sound from his throat, which resounded loudly throughout the tiny room. "I see. It seems like I must apologize to that man. Our battlefields may be different, but he is without doubt a true warrior."

He was laughing, which Kutori took a while to notice. "W-why? We're the ones fighting aren't we?"

"The battle with the Beasts is ours. But the thing he chose to challenge is the wind that flows through you."

"... wind?"

"The thing you call 'determination', or rather your 'resignation'."

Feeling blood rising to her head, Kutori drained the rest of the medicinal tea. Her body became so hot it felt like it would burn up from the inside. What could you possibly boil together to make this drink? Why did a Reptrace who can't control his body temperature even make this? A few worthless questions popped into her head, but she pushed them into a corner of her head for the time being. Now was not the time to be worrying about such things.

"... I see." Her heart felt a little lighter. Or maybe it was just a hole opening up, but there's not much of a difference anyway. "I'm not fit to be a soldier... you knew that, didn't you, First Officer. But you're unexpectedly good at flattery... so I took you seriously."

“What are you talking about? Any prideful scaled citizen can never tell a lie, just as the sun can never set in the north.”

“But I’m giving up now… you said that yourself.”

“Resignation and determination are essentially the same thing. They both refer to a decision to sacrifice something important in order to achieve a goal.”

“Isn’t determination… I don’t know… something more important than that?”

“The worth of all things is determined only by the price that you accept. If you are determined to cast away that which is important to you, then that must have value in and of itself. Of course, resigning to that same fate also carries the same value.”

“I don’t understand.”

“To be perplexed at the beauty of words, I must say, is not very fitting for a soldier,” he said with an uncanny cackling laugh.

“So… in the end, what should I do?”

“Do what you want.”

“… I’m asking you because I don’t know that. What is the correct course of action?”

“There is no such thing as correct on the battlefield. That is why a warrior must embrace the wind within his own heart. To obtain guidance on a path where there is none.”

“… First Officer.”

Things were getting bad. She could hardly understand a single word he said anymore. Until just a few moments ago, she might not have fully processed the conversation, but she could at least absorb it. Now, it seems like the Reptrace had

gotten carried away with his enigmatic sayings. Kutori felt like he might have been saying something wise and profound, but it didn't do her any good if she couldn't understand.

"You said you want to protect the righteousness of your sister's way of fighting?"

"... yes."

"Then before the battle you must find what exactly that righteousness is. We do not know much about the battles of you fairy soldiers. About the history that has piled up over the years, or about the feelings hidden in the shadows. So only you have the capacity to discover that righteousness."

"... rather irresponsible, don't you think?" She tried to include a hint of discontent in her voice, but...

“The wind carries no responsibilities.” He warded off her comment with an unconcerned face (probably).

Kutori sighed. She felt like giving up on a lot of things right about now.

“You might get angry… but I will admit something.”

“What?”

“Truth is, I never wanted to become a warrior.”

The Reptrace burst out into his signature cackle. “I know. That is why you were able to become a superior warrior.”

… they didn’t seem to be on the same page. In a fit of annoyance, she gulped down a second cup of scorching medicinal tea.

4 The Starry Sky Beneath the Starry Sky

"Apparently she's aboard a scouting ship of the Winged Guard, near the 66th Island."

"... how the heck did she end up there?"

"I don't know, but she says she's coming home. She'll ride on the ship for a while, then fly the rest by herself."

With a click, Naigrat shut off the transmission from the communication crystal.

"A rather interesting way to run away from home, huh? I wonder if she has any idea how worried we were..."

"I know, right? Kids with wings have so many ways to express their feelings, I'm jealous. The only way I can relieve stress is by binge eating." She sighed with an

expression of despair on her face. “They really like you. Not just her, but the other kids too. As their caretaker, I admit I’m a little envious.”

“Hmm… I don’t know about that.”

“You haven’t realized it?” Naigrat clasped her hands to her mouth in surprise. “Are you that dense? Or maybe you’re a concealer type?”

“What is that supposed to mean…”

“Hm, well roughly speaking, it’s a broad classification for those ‘good for nothing guys that pretend to not have any interest in romance but secretly want to be approached by girls’.”

… that didn’t make things much clearer.

“If you’re a dense type, it means you genuinely just don’t realize that you’re being liked, and you’ll probably never

figure it out on your own. The girl will get frustrated as she tries more and more approaches, all to no effect. A variation is the mistake type, who mistakes the girl's romantic interest for other emotions.

The concealing type actually realizes that he's being liked, but pretends not to know. The effect is similar to the dense type, but there might be a sense of guilt from continued deceit, or maybe the girl will eventually notice that you're pretending… various other developments can be expected. Well anyways, which type are you?"

"… there are so many things messed up with your explanation that I don't even know where to start." Willem sighed deeply. "If you want to talk about romance and fiction, do it elsewhere. I mean, I won't deny that I appear to be liked by some of them."

“Hmm?” Naigrat opened her eyes wide. “That’s a little unexpected. I thought you were the type of character oblivious to that kind of stuff.”

“Don’t say character... I’m not performing an act or anything.” He scratched his head. “I want to have a serious talk. Love is something that just wells up on its own when you get to that age, regardless of whether or not you actually have a partner. Most of them quickly find someone to pit those feelings against. Someone nearby of the opposite gender, a distant idolized figure, that ideal someone that hope to meet someday. Some keep throwing their feelings at these futile dreams until the very end.

... the girls here never got a chance to do any of those things. Then I came along. Their possible targets increased from zero to one. So, by some weird logic of their own, they convinced themselves that they

were in love. Anyways, something like that — what's with those eyes?"

He realized that Naigrat was staring him down with the utmost intensity.

"Eyes of disbelief at finding a man much worse than expected."

"What... I don't believe I said anything strange. Anyway, I think most of them just yearn for a father figure. Of course I'm glad that they like me, but it's nothing more than that."

"A boring answer, huh?"

"Boring means peaceful. Nothing better than that, right?"

"I guess... I won't deny that, but...." Naigrat pointed straight at Willem's chest. "As a girl, let me say this. While I respect your whole philosophical take on this, in the end you're still ignoring their feelings. Even

though they may be kids, they're still girls with real emotions. I don't like guys that can't be considerate."

Willem wondered if Naigrat could still say 'as a girl' at her age, but decided to not touch upon the matter. He was at least that considerate.

"And even though they're young, for some of them it might be the last chance to have these kinds of feelings. So I want you to properly confront them. I'm not joking around; this is a true request from the bottom of my heart."

"Can't do that." An immediate response. "If romance or love or whatever is that important, then even more reason to not force and rush it in this narrow place. Regul Aire is vast. There are thousands of other fine men out there. Having your daughter someday taken by one of those guys is the duty of a father."

Willem took a minute to think about what he just said. Of course, he hadn't been looking around him with those eyes, so when he thought of men in Regul Aire, about all that popped into his head were guys with green skin or pig faces or scales growing everywhere. But wait... maybe discriminating by looks and race was now a thing of the past? If you just looked at personality, there might be some decent guys.... He imagined a scenario. What if, one day, Kutori came home and introduced her Borgle boyfriend, saying 'we are in a serious relationship'? Could he give them his blessing with a smile?

"Ah!? What's with that face?"

"Oh, sorry. I was just thinking that Grick might not be such a bad guy after all, when you look at him that way..."

"That literally has absolutely nothing to do with our conversation!"

Willem glanced outside the window. Not a single cloud drifted through the sky. A peaceful night.

“I’m gonna head out. If you still want to talk, we’ll continue later.”

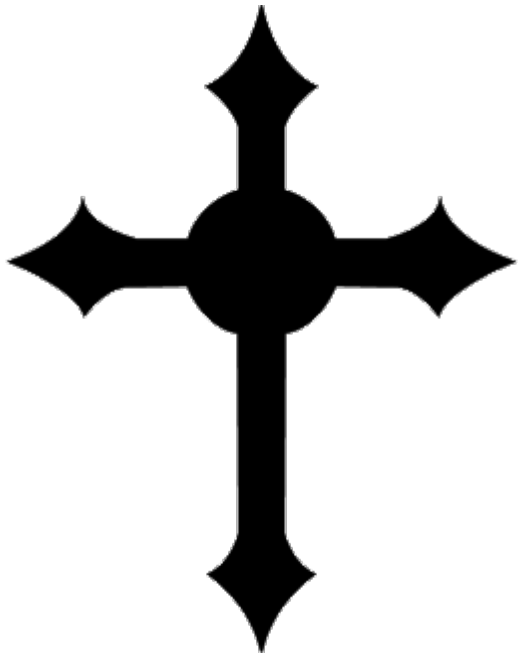
“Wait, where are you going?”

“Star gazing or something. Anyways, I’ll borrow this key.”

He waved his hand briefly, then exited the room.

“Huh? Hey! Wait... that key!”

He pretended not to hear Naigrat’s screams behind him.



Willem stood on top of a small hill located near the edge of the 68th Island, holding Seniolis, which he had taken from the warehouse, in his hands. A gentle breeze floated by, the air felt clear and refreshing, and the stars twinkled softly in the distance. Anyway, it was a perfect night.

He unwrapped the cloth covering Seniolis, exposing it to the wind. Willem then ignited a small amount of Venom. A patch of pain gnawed at his forehead, but

he could tolerate it for the time being.

“Start maintenance,” he murmured and touched one of the shining metal fragments on the blade body. With a soft plunk, the lone shard separated from the blade, drifting through the air until it stopped about five paces away from him. As it settled into position, it emitted the clear ringing sound of a metallophone being struck.

He touched a different metal fragment. That one also glided through the air before stopping a small distance away. It produced a clear sound slightly different than the previous one. He repeated the process with another. And another.

The legendary ancient sword Seniolis consisted of a total of forty one metal shards bound together by spell lines. By manipulating the spell lines, Willem was able to unravel the blade into its individual

pieces. Before long, only a small crystal, previously hidden inside the blade, remained in his palm. Surrounding him, the forty one fragments floated about, emitting faint gleams of light as if creating their own little starry sky.

"Alright..."

First he looked at the general state of the weapon. Some resistances, such as poison or curse, seemed to be operating at a higher level than normal, while others, such as paralyze, hardly worked at all. This must have been the result of a long period of combat without any maintenance. The habits of its users and the types of battles it fought probably affected it over the years as well.

Next, he checked the more specific parameters. Simply put, it was a disaster. Because it had been wielded for so long by brute forcing magic into it, problems had

sprung up all over. A large Venom blockade had formed at the root of the backbone circuit which ran throughout the sword, with protrusions of various sizes surrounding it. Three spell lines had been destroyed completely, and most of the others were beaten up badly, operating at about thirty percent lower efficiency on average.

"How did you guys manage to keep fighting with this..." he murmured with a laugh.

Willem lightly flicked the crystal with his fingertip, sending in a small amount of Venom. It lit up a previously invisible spell line, which then got sucked up by one of the floating metal fragments. Another clear metal sound rang through the air. He sent in another spurt of Venom, which caused a different spell line to shine and a different metal fragment to ring.

He repeated the process again. And again. A flurry of light and sound danced in the air around him. One by one, the dormant spell lines awoke, and the exhausted metal shards regained their vigor.

— he sensed a presence behind his back.

“Welcome home, Miss Runaway.” Willem spoke to the newcomer without turning around.

“... what are you doing?” the presence behind his back asked suspiciously, neglecting to return his greeting.

“Just what it looks like. Doing some maintenance on your partner.”

“Hold on a second. You didn’t even get permission from its user first?”

“I’m the manager around here, aren’t I? The only permission I need is my own.” He let out a cackle.

“That laugh doesn’t fit you.”

“Hmm, is that so?”

“I like your usual softer laugh.”

“Hmm…”

Just a little while ago, he had been telling Naigrat how he was aware of the girls’ feelings. He had tried to play it cool by saying he logically decided to reject those feelings. Yet, just now, his heart skipped a beat.

“Well, go on. Continue your little concert.”

“Concert?”

“Those pretty sounds. They didn’t fit very well together though.”

“Not trying to perform a symphony or anything.”

“Then make it a street performance. I won’t give you any donations, but…”

“… a strange guest has come to listen, huh?”

Willem turned his attention back to the crystal lying in his palm. Kutori sat down beside him, back to back. Once again, the clear metal sounds filled the night sky around the hill.

“These lights… what are they?”

“The Kaliyon is made of a bunch of different Talismans bound together by spell lines into the shape of a sword. Do you know what Talismans are?”

“I’ve heard of them before.”

Now that all methods involved in manufacturing or repairing the swords had been lost, naturally that included the small details and secret techniques as well. All she

had heard was that powerful spells or Talents could be inscribed into paper, ceramic, or metal shards. Those who could wield those fragments received the benefits of the contained spells... or something like that.

Occasionally, such items were still brought up from the land by salvagers. Apparently, it wasn't too rare for them to be circulating amongst the wealthy upper class.

"The light floating in front of your eyes now... that's a Talisman to protect your tongue from burns when you drink something hot."

"... huh?"

"Next to that is one that lets you tell which way is north even in places you haven't been to before. Above that is one that prevents nightmares while you're stuck in bed with a cold. Then, we got one

that lets you imitate cat sounds perfectly, one that protects your fingernails from scratches, one that gets you a six to ten heads ratio on coin tosses…"

"Wait a second. This is Seniolis, right? The legendary weapon? Not the top one hundred convenient little charms?"

"Think about food. Some items, if you eat them separately, they'll taste good and go down just fine. But if you eat them all together, or in just the right combination, they'll destroy your stomach. It's the same idea.

If you tie together a bunch of different Talismans with spell lines, it can produce wildly varied effects due to some complex interference mechanisms. I'm not a specialist so I don't know the details, but the engineers over in the central workshops said something like that.

Anyways, about Seniolis in particular, it's

one of the oldest Kaliyons. I heard it was born practically by a miraculous accident out on the battlefield. That's why it has so many random and oddball Talismans."

"Hmm…." Kutori, tilting her neck in bewilderment, looked around at the forty one floating Talismans. "I didn't know that. Since it's the legendary holy sword and all, I thought it was handed down directly from god or something."

"Well, unfortunately that wasn't the case."

The Emnetwyte at the time were, needless to say, desperate to survive. To accomplish that goal, they utilized anything and everything. Fighting was not a pretty business. Yet, still, they yearned for beauty and perfection. So they named their long sought after symbols of strength Kaliyons, or holy swords.

"I see." Kutori grew silent for a moment. Metallic noises and lights danced around

the pair. “Not too long ago, I spoke with the First Officer.” Slowly, she began to speak again. “He said that if I don’t want to when the time comes, I don’t have to open the gate to the fairy homeland. In order to grow my strength and resolve, he would bet the sinking of the 15th Floating Island.”

“... is that so?”

“Can I really become stronger?”

“Even if you don’t want to, I’ll make sure that you do. I am your manager, after all.”

“I thought you’d say that.” Willem could feel her back move as she laughed. “Well, I guess I’ll go ahead and say it. I don’t want to become stronger.”

“Wait, wait. Isn’t this the part where you realize how much love and support people give you and open up your honest feelings while tearing up?”

“I *am* being honest here. How about you notice that?”

Willem pretended to not hear that last remark. So he had become one of those concealing type guys that Naigrat mentioned earlier, huh? The guilt was a bit worse than he had expected.

“Well, how about this. If you go fight and return home, I’ll listen to one request. Anything you want.”

“Eh?” Kutori was caught off guard for a second. “I-It’s not like I really have anything I want you to do for me. Besides, even if you say ‘anything’, you probably won’t actually do anything big. Like if I said ‘marry me!’ or something…”

“Pass.”

“… of course I know that. But, I’m curious. Why?”

“Well, it’s just not in the range of things I can do. Just like if you requested me to ‘bring a dead guy back to life’ or ‘eliminate all the Beasts’, it would obviously be impossible.”

“Marrying me is as impossible as those things?”

“Of course.”

A child around that age feeling some sort of attraction to a nearby reliable older figure of the opposite gender was only natural. It might have been one valid form of love, but it was also a temporary passion brought about by the sheer lack of options. So taking a step back while that fever cooled down was the responsible thing to do as an adult.

“At least wait until you’ve grown up a little more.”

“If I had the time then I wou–!”

“You have time,” Willem said, cutting Kutori off mid sentence. “You’re about to go fight and buy that time, aren’t you?”

“... but I don’t know how it’ll turn out.”

“Then find a clear reason why you need to return home. Did you know? Soldiers that had a fiancee waiting back home or something had an overall higher survival rate. They were so determined to live no matter what the battle threw at them.”

“Well, that option of having a fiance waiting back home just got crushed a second ago...” Kutori interjected, staring coldly at Willem.

“Ah — well, you know. You can’t go desperately chasing an unrealistic future. Have a more down to earth dream.”

“Isn’t that wrong though? If you’re trying to go all out with this emotional drive thing, then why limit yourself with reality?”

"... you're a smart one, huh?"

All he could manage was a laugh. To hold a reason why you need to return home — of course, these were not originally Willem's words. He just borrowed them from someone else. On top of that, he might have been a little hypocritical since, when that someone told him those words, he ended up going berserk and couldn't return home as promised. While Kutori certainly didn't know all that, it seems like she had caught on to the superficiality of his advice.

"Well if I'm so smart, then I wish you'd stop treating me like a kid."

"I'm afraid I can't."

"Why are you so persistent on that point only?" Kutori said with a strangely adult-like sigh. "... sweets."

"Huh?"

“You know, that dessert you made in the cafeteria a while back. Do you have any other recipes?”

“A few, I guess.”

“Then, what about butter cake?”

— Ah.

“That, of all things?”

“Eh?”

“Never mind.” It wasn’t completely unexpected. He had a feeling the conversation would eventually flow in that direction. “I know how to make it. It was practically beaten into me by my master. But, someone much much better than me was always around, so I never really made it myself.”

“Well, if you know how, then that’s enough. One of my seniors always looked so happy eating butter cake after coming

home from a battle. By the time I could wield a sword, though, it had disappeared from the dessert menu, so I could never be like her. That's why I'm asking you."

Willem took a deep breath in, and slowly let it all out. "Alright," he responded, then resumed his work.

After a little longer, he completed Seniolis' maintenance, resetting the various resistance levels while leaving only the spell resistance at a higher setting. The surplus spell lines that resulting from cutting off various obsolete functions went towards strengthening the foundations.

With his fingertip, Willem pushed the crystal. The floating metal shards surrounding them glided through the air, one by one gathering around it. As each fragment returned to its original place, it emitted a faint ringing sound. The symphony went on for a short while, then,

after the finale, a large sword had been restored in Willem's hands.

"Okay, okay. I'll make you eat so much cake you get heartburn. Got it? You better survive and come home."

He handed Seniolis back to its rightful fake owner.

"Leave it to me," the girl said with a smile.

5 Even If That Battle Ends

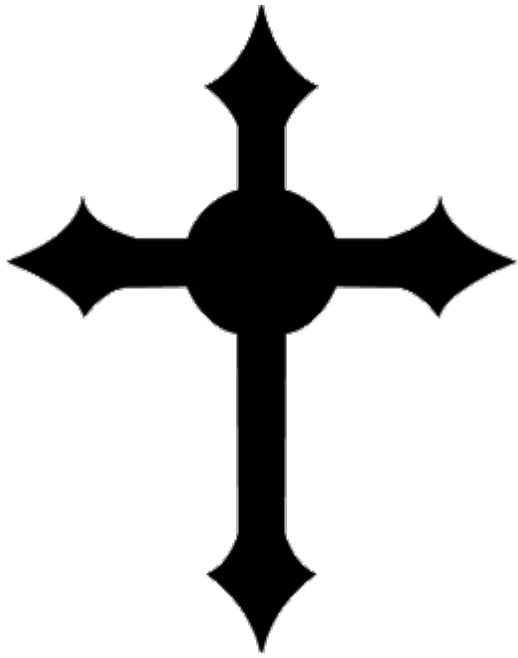
On top of their army uniforms, they wore a covering of light armor. And on their backs, they carried swords so large it almost looked ridiculous. The three girls each finished their preparations for battle.

“Well, I’m off. See ya!” Aiseia waved her hand energetically with her usual smile.

“... hm.” Nephren nodded slightly.

Kutori alone neglected to turn around or leave any words of goodbye behind. The silver brooch attached to her army uniform near the chest simply emitted a faint glow of light, as if trying to say something.

And just like that, the three fairies leaped into the sky, their figures gradually melting into the sunset.



"... are you stupid?!" Those were the first words out of Grick's mouth after listening to the story. "Why are you here eating with me!?"

"What do you mean why? I just told you. To report on the current situation and to say thanks."

"You can do that anytime! Now is called now because it's now or never, you understand!?"

"... well, I'm not sure if you even understand what you just said."

"Who cares about me!? This is you we're talking about! You!"

Well, that's true, but...

Confused at his Borgle friend's unexpected exasperation, Willem took a sip of his salty coffee.

"Anyway, my head's full just from knowing that behind the facade of peace in Regul Aire lay so much unseen drama and sacrifice, damn it. Well, I guess spilling blood in unseen places is the job of a soldier. If you think about it, it's natural, but just thinking about it and actually hearing you tell me about it happening in real life are pretty different. How to put it... the guilt of not knowing about this before might crush me... or more like I want to go hug those girls right now... what's with that scary face?"

“Nothing,” Willem muttered as he drained his coffee cup with a face that would definitely make a little kid cry.

Grick let out a deep sigh. “I thought it would be a more light and easy job, so I gave it to you, but…. Well, it worked out alright in the end, but it’s scary to think what would have happened if I didn’t put much thought into it and gave the job to some random chump.” He paused to gulp some coffee down. “So… why the hell are you here?”

“Well, their battle on the 15th Island starts tomorrow, and it’ll go on for days, and any contact about the outcome won’t be until long after that, you know? There isn’t exactly much I can do right now.”

“No, no, no! Usually in times like those, you’re so worried you can’t eat properly or can’t fall asleep or something like that! So why are you here living your everyday life

like nothing's happening at all!?"

"Me getting anxious about it won't change their chances of winning. Up until yesterday, I taught them everything I could and fine tuned their swords as much as possible. But, their chances of coming home safely are probably still just a little above five percent. No use in starting to worry now."

"Oh, come on! You of all people can't doubt their victory!"

"I'm not the type to avert my eyes from reality."

"But don't avert your eyes from your hopes and dreams either! You just gotta believe!"

"Everyone struggles because life doesn't work like that.... Anyway, being so convinced about something just makes it harder to get back to reality when

something unexpected happens. If I'm going to believe in them, then that means I should be ready to accept whatever outcome they bring about."

"So cold, man! I don't feel the heat of romance in your words!"

"Well, I am from a race not suited to be salvagers."

Grick gave a cackling *kekeke* laugh, which Willem interrupted by standing up.

"What, you got somewhere to be?"

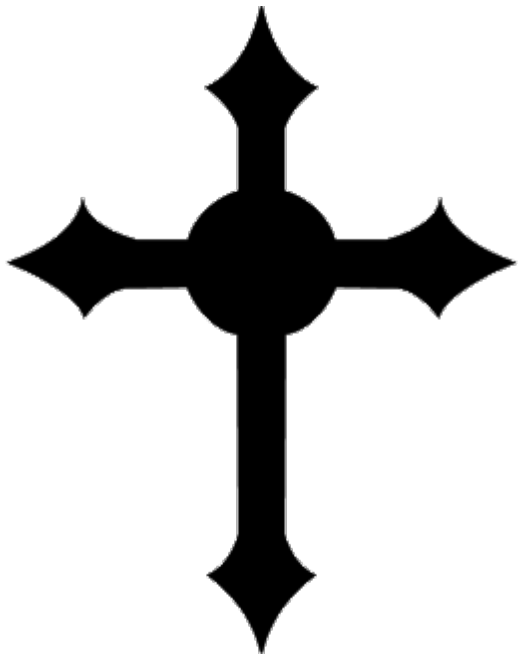
"Yeah, I got a little food shopping to do."

"Willem... you really are just going about your everyday life, huh?"

"Of course. There are people fighting to protect this lifestyle for me."

Grick fell silent.

Right as Willem gave a quick ‘see ya’ and started to walk away, “... ah, that’s right.” He paused, remembering that he had something to ask. “Do you know any shops around here with cheap butter and flour?”



And so, he returned to the Orlandri Trading Company’s fourth warehouse.

“Willem!”

The girls chasing around a ball on the grounds recognized him and came running

up.

“Where did you go? We looked everywhere!”

“Um, it’s been a while, so, would you like to play with us?”

“Lately you haven’t been talking to us, with all your fainting and stuff, so it wouldn’t hurt to hang out with us at least today.”

Little hands tugged at his sleeves from all directions, but…

“Sorry, today I have something I need to do.”

Ehhh? Their voices of protest bordered on screams.

“I’ll play with you guys later.”

He headed straight for the kitchen, paying no attention to the mopey voices

targeted at his back. In his mind, he flipped through his 'Desserts Popular with Small Children' recipe book and found the page for butter cake. He only dimly remembered most of the small details, since the recipe never once led to a success at the orphanage (it always got compared to the 'Daughter's'), but he told himself that it would work out somehow. There was still plenty of time to practice, and, on top of that, a spoonful of love or something to that effect surely has a big impact on the taste. Probably.

Faaather.

Suddenly, he felt like he heard a voice calling out to him from somewhere.

"... Almaria?"

He turned around, he looked up at the sky, but of course no one was to be found. All he saw were clouds shaped like thin silk, spreading out endlessly beyond the

gradations of red and scarlet above.

In the first place, the owner of that voice no longer existed in this world. She left long ago, unable to welcome home the person she had been waiting for all that time, the person who she continued to bake butter cake for so that their promise could be fulfilled.

“Sorry, Almaria.”

He felt like he was doing something horrible. Not just to her, but also to the comrades that had fought beside him. To the nobles who had seen them off with high expectations of their victory. Why couldn’t he have died with them? Or rather, why didn’t he end his life as soon as he awoke in this world? Does living this life like I’m doing now not break all those promises from long ago?

He understood, but still...

“I’m sorry. I really am.” Facing the heavens, he bowed his head in apology.

He had no place in this world. But, if someone were to make him a part of her place, then, in order to be able to say ‘welcome home’, he needed to stay here. Willem decided that in his mind as he took out his apron.

『Before This World Ends — B』

-promise/result-

In the darkness of night, standing in the middle of a vast expanse of gray, a single ‘Beast’ howled. Its voice did not cause the air to vibrate and produce sound in the traditional sense. And of course, within the range of its cries, not a single living being existed.

So nothing was there to listen to or understand the voice of the Shiantor, ‘The First Beast’. But still, the ‘Beast’ continued to howl, not growing tired nor losing hope, or perhaps not even understanding those concepts, forever and ever, producing a meaningless sound which reached no one’s ears.

Gazing down from Regul Aire, the gray landscape may look the same everywhere, but if you actually come down to the ground, you would be surprised at how much of the ups and downs of the previous terrain you can notice. Where a hill used to

be, a gently sloping sand dune now sits. A gray peak where a steep, towering mountain used to be. And in places where stone buildings used to stand, you can clearly see ruins, still containing traces of the former architecture. Because of this, the salvagers can weave through the ashen debris, searching for vestiges of the long lost civilization.

Now, let's talk about the land right at the foot of the howling 'Beast'. Just a little longer than five hundred years ago, there was a small town here. It wasn't very prosperous and didn't have any significant industries, but what it did have was a long history. From the stone paving on streets and the trees planted alongside it and the stops of the patrol wagons, all the way to the cheap apartments, everything in the town seemed to stand proudly with a certain personality which seemed to say 'I've been here for hundreds of years, you know'.

The orphanage on the outskirts of town was no exception. Originally an old kindergarten, the repurposed building stood with a mighty pose that reminded you of its lengthy past. In other words, it was falling apart. Every time rain fell or the wind blew, its inhabitants ran about with wooden boards and hammer at the ready.

The town had a total population of about three thousand. And the orphanage, about twenty. That was 526 years ago. Now, those scenes remain only in the memories of a certain someone.

And now, the ‘Beast’ continues to howl, releasing scream after scream which go nowhere and reach no one.

Let me tell you a little secret.

It is said that the Elven elders used to be able to exchange words solely using their minds, not creating any vibrations in the air. What the ‘Beast’ is now doing is almost

identical to that: a type of telepathic communication which only one from a similar species with a similar mental structure can receive.

And each of the seventeen ‘Beasts’ counts as its own species. The words of a Shiantor will reach only another Shiantor.

And the Shiantor is the only one of its kind. Its entire existence, so close to completeness, remains inside a single body. Even if you search the whole world, you’ll never find anything that could be called its kin.

So the voice of the ‘Beast’ will truly reach nowhere and be heard by no one. It simply continues to howl a soundless symphony, as it has been doing since it first appeared in this world, and as it will continue to do for eternity.

Faaather.

The cries of the lone ‘Beast’, without touching anyone, without resounding with anyone, simply melt into the infinite ashen wasteland and disappear.